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99

MIND-SEAL OF THE BUDDHAS

Patriarch Ou-i

蕅益大師跋

經云。末法億億人修行。罕一得道。唯依念佛得度。嗚呼。今正是其時矣。（吐心吐膽）捨此不思議法門。其何能淑。旭出家時。宗乘自負。藐視教典。妄謂持名。曲爲中下。後因大病。（現身說法）發意西歸。復研妙宗圓中二鈔。及雲棲疏鈔等書。始知念佛三昧。實無上寶王。方肯死心執持名號。萬牛莫挽也。吾友去病。久事淨業。欲令此經大旨。（言有不褒己者）辭不繁而炳著。請余爲述要解。余欲普與法界有情同生極樂。理不可卻。舉筆於丁亥（順治四年）九月二十有七。脫稿於十月初五。凡九日告成。所願一句一字。（字字道實。果然。果然。）咸作資糧。一見一聞。同階不退。信疑皆植道種。讚謗等歸解脫。仰唯諸佛菩薩。攝受證明。同學友人。隨喜加被。西有道人蕅益智旭閣筆故跋。時年四十有九。

Mind-Seal of the Buddhas

(Commentary on the Amitabha Sutra)

O-mi-to Ching Yao-chieh

A-Di-Đà Kinh Yếu-Giải

Books by J.C. Cleary

The Blue Cliff Record (co-translator), 1977
Swampland Flowers, 1977
Zen Lore from the Source Mirror, 1979
Zen Dawn, 1986
A Buddha from Korea, 1988
Zibo: The Last Great Zen Master of China, 1989
Worldly Wisdom: Confucian Teachings from the Ming Dynasty, 1991
A Tune Beyond the Clouds: Zen Teachings from Old China, 1991
Meditating with Koans, 1992
Zen Letters: Teachings of Yuanwu, 1994
Recorded Sayings of Linji
Wumen's Barrier
Pure Land, Pure Mind, 1994 and 1995

J.C. Cleary

Dr. J.C. Cleary, the translator of this volume, holds a Ph.D. (Harvard University) in East Asian Languages and Civilizations. He has translated a number of Zen and Confucian texts including the *Blue Cliff Record (Pi Yen Lu)*, a well-known collection of some one hundred famous koans selected, *inter alia*, from the Zen classic of all times, *Transmission of the Lamp*.

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COVER ILLUSTRATION

Amitabha Buddha with the mudra of rebirth in the Western Paradise

Painting on silk
18th century
National Museum of Korea
Seoul

The Sutra Translation Committee wishes to thank upasaka *Lee Tsu-ku* for his generous support and encouragement, upasakas *Duong Dinh Hy* and *Pram Nguyen* for reviewing the text, as well as *Richard Chau* and *Daniel Audéaud*, for their assistance in the production of this book ... May the merits and virtues accrued revert to those associated with SP, upasaka *Nguyên Thanh Diêu* and all sentient beings throughout the worlds of the Ten Directions.

Other works by the Committee:

1. *The Buddhist Liturgy*
2. *The Sutra of Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha's Fundamental Vows*
3. *The Dharma of Mind Transmission*
4. *The Practice of Bodhisattva Dharma*
5. *An Exhortation to Be Alert to the Dharma*
6. *A Composition Urging the Generation of the Bodhi Mind*
7. *Practice and Attain Sudden Enlightenment*
8. *Pure Land Buddhism: Dialogues with Ancient Masters*
9. *Pure-Land Zen, Zen Pure-Land*
10. *Pure Land of the Patriarchs*
11. *Horizontal Escape: Pure Land Buddhism in Theory and Practice**
12. *Mind Transmission Seals*
13. *The Prajna Paramita Heart Sutra*
14. *Pure Land, Pure Mind*
15. *Bouddhisme, Sagesse et Foi*
16. *Entering the Tao of Sudden Enlightenment*
17. *The Direct Approach to Buddhadharma*
18. *Three Sutras on Complete Enlightenment*
19. *Terre Pure des Patriarches*
20. *Samantabhadra: Supreme Vows / Voeux Suprêmes*
21. *Zen & Sukhavati: Lettres du Maître Yin-kouang*

*Simultaneously published as *Buddhism of Wisdom and Faith*.

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MIND-SEAL OF THE BUDDHAS

Patriarch Ou-i's Commentary on the Amitabha Sutra

गुल्मी, थानपति-२ निवासी वेदराज ज्ञवालीद्वारा
वाल्मीकि विद्यापीठ पुस्तकालयलाई
उपहार स्वरूप प्रदान।
वे.रा.ज्ञवाली
२०६२/११/२८

Translated by
J.C. Cleary

Foreword, Notes and Glossary
by Van Hien Study Group

SUTRA TRANSLATION COMMITTEE OF
THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA
New York - San Francisco - Niagara Falls - Toronto
1997

This book is a translation from the Chinese of a major commentary on the *Amitabha Sutra*, the key text of Pure Land Buddhism. Its author is the distinguished seventeenth century T'ien-t'ai Master Ou-i, subsequently honored as the ninth Patriarch of the Pure Land school. To our knowledge, it is the first time this work has ever been rendered into a Western language.

Chinese title: O-mi-to Ching Yao-chieh
Vietnamese title: A-Di-đà Kinh Yếu-Giải

Second edition
1997

ACC 646/657

Sutra Translation Committee of the
United States and Canada

Reprinted and donated by
The Corporate Body of
the Buddha Educational Foundation
11F., 55 Hang Chow South Road Sec 1,
Taipei, Taiwan, R.O.C.
Tel: 886-2-23951198 , Fax: 886-2-23913415
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Editors' Foreword

Of all the forms of Buddhism currently practiced in Asia, *Pure Land* has been the most widespread for the past thousand years. At the core of this school is a text of great beauty and poetry, the *Amitabha Sutra*, recited every evening in countless temples and homes throughout the Mahayana world. This important text shares with the *Avatamsaka* and *Brahma Net* sutras the distinction of being among the few key scriptures taught spontaneously without a specific request from the assembly.

Although several translations of the sutra itself are available (the best known, by the renowned scholar Max Müller, dating from the 19th century) no *seminal* commentary appears to have been published in English. The Van Hien Study Group is therefore privileged to be associated with Dr. J.C. Cleary's present rendering of a major Chinese commentary on the *Amitabha Sutra* by the T'ien-t'ai Master Ou-i (1599-1655), later recognized as the ninth Patriarch of the Pure Land school.

o o o

To those pressed for time but hungry for solace, Pure Land Buddhism offers the vision of a pure, idealistic realm, where Amitabha Buddha has vowed to assist all those who sincerely call upon Him. Pure Land literature tells the beautiful story of the Bodhisattva Dharmakara, the future Buddha Amitabha,

> who had for eons past been deeply moved by the suffering of sentient beings and who had determined to establish a Land of Bliss where all beings could experience emancipation from their pain ... In the presence of the eighty-first Buddha of the past, Lokesvara, Dharmakara made forty-eight vows relating to this Paradise, and promised that he would not accept enlightenment if he could not achieve his goals ... When, after countless ages, Dharmakara

> achieved enlightenment and became a Buddha, the conditions of his [18th] vow were fulfilled: he became the Lord of Sukhavati, the Western Paradise, where the faithful will be reborn in bliss, there to progress through stages of increasing awareness until they finally achieve enlightenment. (*Pure Land Buddhist Painting*, p. 14-15.)

Sukhavati, the Pure Land, is of course, ultimately Mind-created but to human beings bound by delusion, attachments and endless discrimination between self and others, mine and yours, it is also *real* – as real as our evanescent, dreamlike world. Consider this exchange between two Zen monks:

> Disciple: *Master, does the Pure Land exist?*
> Master: *Does this world exist?*
> Disciple: *Of course it does, Master.*
> Master: *If this world exists, then the Pure Land exists all the more.**

May all sentient beings rediscover the sublime vows of the Buddha of Light, Life and Compassion, may they rediscover their Bodhi Mind – the Mind-seal of the Buddhas!**

D.Phung/Minh Thanh/P.D.Leigh *Rye Brook: Vesak, May '96*

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*"In secular western thought, awareness of psychological projection as a source of supernatural being has served to demythologize demons, goblins, angels and saints and rob them of their power. The Bardo Thodol [Tibetan Book of the Dead], however, speaks of the deities as 'projections' but never as 'mere projections.' The deities are present and must be dealt with religiously ... not just by intellectual insight." (D.G. Dawe in *The Perennial Dictionary of World Religions*, p. 93.)

***Bodhi Mind*: the determination to achieve Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings. *Mind-seal*: the heart or essence of the teaching.

Pure Land Buddhism in a Nutshell

Of the various forms of Buddhism that developed after the demise of the historical Buddha in 480 B.C., Mahayana (the "Great Vehicle") became the dominant tradition in East and parts of Southeast Asia. This broad area encompasses China, Korea, Vietnam and Japan, among other countries.

In time, a number of schools arose within Mahayana Buddhism in accordance with the capacities and circumstances of the people, the main ones being the Zen, Pure Land and Esoteric schools. Among these schools, Pure Land has the greatest number of adherents, although its teachings and methodology are not widely known in the West.

> Given its popular appeal, [Pure Land] quickly became the object of the most dominant form of Buddhist devotion in East Asia. (M. Eliade, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religions*, Vol. 12.)

What is Pure Land?

> [Pure Land comprises the schools] of East Asia which emphasize aspects of Mahayana Buddhism stressing faith in Amida, meditation on and recitation of his name, and the religious goal of being reborn in his "Pure Land," or "Western Paradise." (Keith Crim, general editor, *Perennial Dictionary of World Religions*, p. 586.)

The most common Pure Land practice is the recitation of Amitabha Buddha's name. This should be done with utmost faith and a sincere vow to achieve rebirth in the Pure Land.

Along with this popular form of Pure Land, there is a higher aspect, in which Amitabha, the Buddha of Infinite Light and Life, is equated with our Buddha Nature, infinitely bright and everlasting *(Self-Nature Amitabha, Mind-Only Pure Land)*.

Main Characteristics of Pure Land

i) Its teachings are based on *compassion*, on faith in the compassionate Vows of Amitabha Buddha to welcome and guide all sentient beings to His Pure Land.

ii) It is an *easy method*, in terms of both goal (rebirth in the Western Pure Land as a stepping-stone toward Buddhahood) and form of cultivation (can be practiced anywhere, any time with no special liturgy, accoutrements or guidance).

iii) It is a *panacea* for the diseases of the mind, unlike other methods or meditations which are directed to specific illnesses (e.g., meditation on the corpse is designed to sever lust, counting the breath is meant to rein in the wandering mind).

iv) It is a *democratic* method that empowers its adherents, freeing them from arcane metaphysics as well as dependence on teachers and other mediating authority figures.

For these reasons, Pure Land has, for centuries, been the dominant tradition in East Asia, playing a crucial role in the democratization of Buddhism and the *rise of the lay movement*. Honen Shonin (1133-1212), the Patriarch of the Jodo (Pure Land) school in Japan, expressed the very essence of Pure Land teaching when he wrote:

> There shall be no distinction, no regard to male or female, good or bad, exalted or lowly; none shall fail to be in his Land of Purity after having called, with complete faith, on Amida. (Quoted by Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis in Joji Okazaki, *Pure Land Buddhist Painting*, p. 14.)

Van Hien Study Group

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वेदराज ज्ञवाली
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Contents

.EDITORS' FOREWORD i

.PURE LAND BUDDHISM IN A NUTSHELL iii

.INTRODUCTION (J.C. Cleary) 1

Commentary on the Amitabha Sutra

Essence of the sutra 33

Explanation of the text 45

Afterword 124

Appendix. *Avatamsaka Sutra: Vows of Samantabhadra* 127

.Notes 147
.*Glossary* 165
.Bibliography 195
.*Index* 199

The supreme and endless blessings
of Samantabhadra's deeds,
I now universally transfer.
May every living being, drowning
and adrift,
Soon return to the Land of Limitless
Light!

The Vows of Samantabhadra
Avatamsaka Sutra

Introduction

This work presents a translation of the *Amitabha Sutra*, a seminal text of Pure Land Buddhism, along with a translation of a commentary on the sutra by the eminent seventeenth century Pure Land Master Ou-i. It is appropriate to introduce the translations with a few words on the general nature of the Buddhist teachings and the specifics of Pure Land Buddhism, and a brief note on the life and times of Master Ou-i himself, and the moment in Buddhist history in which he worked.

Buddhism: Skill in Means

Buddhism has taken on many diverse forms during its two and a half thousand year history, but none has been more influential than Pure Land Buddhism. The special methods and techniques of Pure Land Buddhism are specifically designed to enhance the spiritual focus of all people. Pure Land practices can be integrated into the daily work and family life of anyone of any age, no matter what their circumstances, no matter how pressed they are for time, no matter what their karmic entanglements. For this reason, Pure Land Buddhism has always been immensely popular wherever it has been propagated, and has been the most widely practiced form of Buddhism in East Asia for the past thousand years and more.[1]

According to the basic principle of Buddhist teaching, the principle of skill in means, it is essential that any presentation of the Buddhist message be adapted to the needs and capacities of the particular people to whom it is being offered. From the Buddhist point of view, then, it is not only perfectly legitimate, but absolutely necessary, that Buddhism should have taken on so many forms during its long history.

Within the perspective of skill in means, there can be no question of judging any particular form of the true Buddhist Teaching as higher or lower than any other form. People's needs vary, and so through the generations enlightened teachers acting out of wisdom and compassion have established teachings that vary in form, but still serve the same goal.[2]

The only thing that matters is the *effectiveness* of any given formulation of Buddhism -- whether it leads people to act more charitably, to behave with self-restraint, to show patience towards others, to dedicate themselves to spiritual advancement, to perfect their powers of concentration, and ultimately to develop enlightened wisdom. There's a Zen saying: "Even false words are true if they lead to liberation; even true words are false if they become the object of attachment."

The champions of Pure Land Buddhism have always made the case that Pure Land methods are especially valuable because they are particularly effective in meeting the needs of the greatest number of people. When we face facts, most of us have to admit that we see little realistic prospect of achieving salvation through the eons of gradual practice spoken of in the Buddhist scriptures, or the heroic efforts of the Zen masters, or the years of esoteric dedication demanded by the Esoteric Schools. Pure Land practice, on the other hand, is explicitly designed as an easy way, open to all.[3]

The Pure Land Teaching: Buddha-Remembrance

Pure Land Buddhism centers on faith in Amitabha Buddha, the Buddha of Infinite Light and Infinite Life. Amitabha has promised rebirth in his Pure Land to all those who singlemindedly invoke his name. Amitabha's Pure Land, called "The Land of Ultimate Bliss," is a pure realm where the ills of our world do not exist. Once reborn in the Pure Land, we are freed from the defilements and fixations that block the path to enlightenment here in our mundane world, and we can continue our spiritual progress under the direct tutelage of Amitabha and the assembly of saints and sages.

Pure Land believers show their faith in Amitabha's promise by taking a vow to be reborn in Amitabha's Pure Land. They practice their faith by reciting the name of Amitabha Buddha, by contemplating his qualities, by visualizing his image.

Pure Land practice focuses the mind on Amitabha. The tribulations of our world become a temporary inconvenience that cannot sidetrack us, as we make our way surely and steadily toward rebirth in Amitabha's Land of Ultimate Bliss. We no longer identify with the inevitable ups and downs of social roles and personal struggles -- we have faith that our true identity is as inhabitants of the Pure Land, and companions to Amitabha Buddha. We carry on with our work, and fulfill our social duties, but our real work is reciting Amitabha Buddha's name, and our real duty is clarifying our minds in "remembering" Amitabha Buddha.

Faith, vows, and *practice* go together and support each other in Pure Land Buddhism. In the words of Master Ou-i, whose commentary on the *Amitabha Sutra* is translated below: "Without faith, we are not sufficiently equipped to take vows. Without vows, we are not sufficiently equipped to guide our practice. Without the wondrous practice of reciting the Buddha-name, we are not sufficiently equipped to fulfill our vows and to bring our faith to fruition. "

The hallmark of Pure Land Buddhism is what is called "reciting the Buddha-name," that is, invoking Amitabha Buddha by chanting his name. Through reciting the Buddha-name, we focus our attention on Amitabha Buddha. This enables us to achieve *Buddha-remembrance*, that is, mindfulness of Buddha.

To understand Buddha-remembrance, we must recall just what the word "Buddha" means. With a clear idea of the various levels of meaning of the word

"Buddha", we can also see how Pure Land Buddhism fits into the whole spectrum of Buddhist teachings.

At the most general level, "Buddha" is a name for the absolute reality that permeates all particular forms of being; the special term for this is "Dharmakaya Buddha". "Buddha" is the ocean; everything in the universe, including ourselves, other life-forms, natural phenomena, the planets and the stars and the galaxies, are all waves on the Buddha-ocean. "Buddha" is our very substance and essence, but how many of us are aware of this minute to minute, not just as an abstract notion, but as a palpable experience?

"Buddha" is also the name for those who do actively experience this absolute reality in their daily lives, and tap into its inherent qualities of compassion, wisdom, power, and purity -- these are the enlightened ones, "the Buddhas". The Great Vehicle sutras constantly speak of "all the Buddhas of the past, present, and future, in all the worlds of the ten directions." By this the sutras mean to let us know that countless beings in the past, present, and future, not only on our earth, but on all the worlds where sentient beings exist, have experienced, are experiencing, and will experience the one absolute reality, and become endowed with its power to communicate enlightenment.

Master Ou-i expresses it this way: "Fundamentally all the Buddhas manifest their teaching activities from within the Dharmakaya. They solidify sentient beings' affinity with the truth and strengthen their seeds of enlightenment ... They energize teaching vehicles and expound them to vast audiences. They plunge into the ocean of suffering where sentient beings dwell, and use their compassion to enable them to harmonize with the still light. "

In this sense, Buddha has had and will have many different embodiments. The Buddhist scriptures name countless Buddhas, their worlds and their eras. Among the most well-known are such figures as Sakyamuni Buddha (the historical Buddha born in India, the propounder of the teaching of enlightenment for one era here on earth), or Maitreya Buddha (the future Buddha, who will bring a new dispensation of wisdom and justice to the earth in a time to come), and Vairocana Buddha (the cosmic illuminator Buddha whose light reaches all worlds). Amitabha Buddha is one Buddha among many, but one with a special affinity for the people of our world.

"Buddha" as the one absolute reality is termed "the Dharmakaya", which means "the truth-body (Dharma Body) of Buddha" or "the body of reality". The Dharmakaya is "the true pure reality of all the enlightened ones, beyond characteristics, quiescent, beyond all theorizing, possessed of true pure virtues without limit, the everywhere-equal true nature of all things."

"Buddha" in the form of specific enlightened beings is termed "the Nirmanakaya", which means the "form-bodies of Buddha" or "the Emanation Bodies". The idea is that to communicate the teaching, Buddha must take on specific forms within the range of awareness of ordinary sentient beings, by emanating specific embodiments, the Nirmanakaya. "All Nirmanakaya arise from skill in means," according to the *Flower Ornament [Avatamsaka]*

Sutra. The perceived forms may vary, but the underlying reality of Buddha is one.

The word "Buddha" is also used to refer to the inherent potential for enlightened perception that all people share. According to Great Vehicle Buddhism, we all have "Buddha-nature", and the one great mission of all forms of Buddhism is to bring this to light, to make us aware of our Buddha-nature, and enable us to function by means of it in our daily lives. In this context, remembering Buddha, *Buddha-remembrance*, means remembering our own true nature, the capacity for lucid wisdom and selfless compassion that is our birthright. By becoming mindful of Buddha (i.e. reciting the Buddha-name), we are just regaining our real identity.

All forms of Great Vehicle Buddhism aim for Buddha-remembrance in this sense. *What is distinctive about Pure Land Buddhism is that it teaches that reciting the name of Amitabha Buddha is the most effective and most widely applicable method of remembering Buddha.* Pure Land Buddhism was designed as a simple, universally accessible method through which ordinary people could come into contact with the enlightening essence.[4]

Master Ou-i reflects this perspective on Buddha-remembrance consistently throughout his commentary on the *Amitabha Sutra*: "*The name of Amitabha is the inherently enlightened true nature of sentient beings, and reciting the name of Amitabha reveals this enlightenment.* ... If we are in accord with our inherently enlightened true nature for a moment, we are Buddhas for a moment, and if we are in accord with our inherently enlightened true nature moment after moment, we are Buddhas moment after moment."

The Vision of the Amitabha Sutra

This brief but colorful text, *The Amitabha Sutra*, gives the basic charter for Pure Land belief and practice. Following the usual model for sutras, it presents its message in the form of a talk delivered by Sakyamuni Buddha to an assembly including both humans and supernatural beings.

Buddha begins his lesson by proclaiming the existence of Amitabha and his Pure Land:

"West of here, past a hundred billion Buddha-lands, there exists a world called 'Ultimate Bliss'. In this land there exists a Buddha called Amitabha, who is expounding the Dharma right now.

"Why is this land called 'Ultimate Bliss'? It is called 'Ultimate Bliss' because the sentient beings in this land are free from the myriad sufferings, and experience nothing but happiness."

Buddha goes on to explain the significance of Amitabha and his Pure Land environment for the salvation of sentient beings:

"What do you think: why is this Buddha called Amitabha?

"The light of this Buddha is infinite, and shines on all lands throughout the universe without obstruction. Thus this Buddha is called Amitabha.

"Also, the life span of this Buddha and his people is an infinite number of immeasurable eons, and so he is called Amitabha.

"Amitabha Buddha attained enlightenment ten eons ago. What's more, this Buddha has innumerable disciples, all of whom are Arhats, and whose numbers are incalculable. Amitabha also has a following of innumerable enlightening beings, Bodhisattvas who follow the Greater Vehicle Teachings.

"None of the sentient beings who are born in the Land of Ultimate Bliss ever fall back into a lower realm. Many among them have only one more lifetime before enlightenment. These beings are very numerous, and their number is incalculable: they can be spoken of as innumerable.

"When sentient beings hear [of the Land of Ultimate Bliss], they must take a vow to be born in this Land. Why so? So that they can be together with all these beings of superior goodness."

The sutra also describes the wonders of the Pure Land: trees made of jewels, jewel ponds, buildings made of precious stones, wondrous lotuses emitting colored lights, celestial music constantly playing, gorgeous flowers falling from the sky, the earth covered with tawny gold, birds communicating the Buddhist teachings in their songs. Everything in the Pure Land works together to remind the inhabitants of the truths of Buddhism. An ideal land indeed!

Above all, people in the Pure Land suffer none of the evils to which flesh is heir in our world. They are free from pain, from hunger, from sickness, from old age and death.

People in the Pure Land also benefit from being in the direct presence of Amitabha and his vast assembly of enlightening sages. Their own life spans become infinite, and they are guaranteed an endless sojourn in the Pure Land; until they too enter the ranks of the enlightened ones.

Master Ou-i further clarifies our view of the wonders of the Pure Land: "All the adornments of the dwellings in the Pure Land and the settings in which sentient beings are reborn in the Pure Land are created by the inherently real merits of the great vows and great deeds of Amitabha Buddha. That's why he can adorn all dimensions of the Pure Land, and embrace all the ordinary people and saints of all the worlds of the past, present, and future, and enable them to be reborn in the Pure Land."

Master Ou-i also reflects upon Amitabha's Land of Ultimate Bliss from the perspective of Hua-yen Buddhism, where the interpenetration of infinite arrays of worlds is the basic medium of the enlightening being's perception. Master Ou-i stresses this in his comments on the passage in the sutra describing the inhabitants of Amitabha's Pure Land returning from their regular journeys to other worlds.

First, the sutra passage:

"Every morning the sentient beings of this land decorate their garments with multitudes of wondrous flowers and make offerings to hundreds of billions of Buddhas in other worlds. When it is meal time, they return to their own land, to eat and circumambulate the teaching assembly."

Master Ou-i comments: "This passage shows that in the Pure Land, every sound, every sense-object, every moment, and even every step and every snap of the fingers, interpenetrates without obstruction the Three Jewels of all the worlds of the ten directions. It also shows that in our mundane world the defilements and obstructions are so serious that our world is separated off from the Land of Ultimate Bliss, even though it is not really separated from it. When we are reborn in the Land of Ultimate Bliss, our merit will be so great that we will be separated from this mundane world called 'Endurance', without really being separated from it."

Significantly, the *Amitabha Sutra* does not only dwell upon Amitabha and his Pure Land in the West, but goes on to describe in turn the Buddhas and their lands in all directions. Master Ou-i explains this as if it is a matter of course: "Space in [any given direction] is infinite, and there are an infinite number of worlds there. Since there is an infinite number of worlds, there is also an infinite number of Buddhas who dwell in those worlds... That's why the sutra refers to 'countless other Buddhas'."

Again, the key is to comprehend that every particular Buddha is essentially an emanation of the one absolute reality, the Dharmakaya. Buddha is both one and many, as Master Ou-i reminds us: "Buddha has countless virtues, and so he must have countless names, names established according to the teaching situation. Sometimes these names are based on causal conditions, sometimes on results achieved, sometimes on inherent nature, sometimes on apparent characteristics, sometimes on practices or vows or other things. ... Each name illustrates a particular quality of Buddhahood. If we were to try to express all the qualities of the enlightened ones, we could talk till the end of time and never be able to finish."

By naming some of these Buddhas, the sutra intends that we focus on the qualities associated with the meanings of the names, and let them add power to our work on the path. The litany of names heightens the effect of the array of purified lands that the sutra is showing, to the benefit of sentient beings.

With so many Buddhas in the cosmos, why focus on Amitabha? Master Ou-i answers this question explicitly:

> "Why not make the whole universe the focal point [instead of Amitabha's Pure Land]? -- There are three reasons. We focus on Amitabha's Pure Land because this makes it easy for beginners to orient their minds, because Amitabha's fundamental vows are more powerful, and because Amitabha has a special affinity with the sentient beings in our world."

Near the end of the sutra, after having prescribed the method of invoking the name of Amitabha, Buddha Sakyamuni offers praise to all the other Buddhas, and acknowledges their praise of him for being able to teach the method of invoking Amitabha in the difficult conditions of a corrupt world:

"Just as I am now extolling the inconceivable merits of all the Buddhas, all those Buddhas are likewise extolling my inconceivable merits, with these words:

> Sakyamuni Buddha is able to carry out a most difficult and rare task. In the world 'Endurance', in an evil world of the Five Corruptions – the corruption of the age, the corruption of views, the corruption of affliction, the corruption of sentient beings, and the corruption of life – he is able to achieve complete, unexcelled enlightenment, and to expound the Truth which beings in all worlds find hard to believe."

Reciting the Buddha-Name

In the *Amitabha Sutra*, Sakyamuni Buddha sets forth the parameters for the fundamental Pure Land practice of becoming mindful of Buddha by reciting the Buddha-name of Amitabha [Buddha Recitation]. Buddha says:

"If there are good men or good women who hear of Amitabha Buddha, and recite his name wholeheartedly without confusion for one day or two days or three days or four days or five days or six days or seven days, then when these people are about to die, Amitabha Buddha and all the sages who are with him will appear before them. When these people die, their minds will not fall into delusion, and they will attain rebirth in Amitabha Buddha's Land of Ultimate Bliss. I have seen this benefit, and so I speak these words. If sentient beings hear what I say, they must make a vow to be born in that land."

Many forms of reciting the Buddha-name have been sanctioned and recommended by Pure Land experts: reciting the Buddha-name in solitude or in groups, silently (with the sound in the mind's voice and ear) or aloud, quietly or forcefully, when sitting, standing, walking or lying down, amidst the day's duties or before or after them. An allied method, combining Pure Land with Zen, is to recite the Buddha-name, while focusing on the point "Who is it who is reciting the Buddha-name?"

The prime goal is to focus on the Buddha-name "with mind unified and not chaotic, (ie singlemindedly)." Reciting the Buddha-name is one of the many many Buddhist practices designed to achieve this goal: its beauty is that it is safe and comparatively simple to use, and within reach of ordinary beings as well as saints. But even if we cannot achieve total concentration, reciting the Buddha-name is still beneficial. Master Ou-i explains: "When we speak of concentrating on invoking the Buddha-name with a mind that is unified and not chaotic, we are using the Buddha-name to summon up the qualities of Buddhahood. Since the qualities of Buddhahood are inconceivable, the Buddha-name itself is also inconceivable. Since the merits of the Buddha-name are also inconceivable, even if we recite the Buddha-name in a scattered state of mind, it is still a seed of enlightenment, a way of persevering and ascending toward enlightenment without falling back."

Reciting the Buddha-name is one method among a range of Pure Land methods: visualizing Amitabha, contemplating the attributes of Amitabha, doing prostrations, making offerings, practicing repentance, cultivating a mindfulness of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, being mindful of discipline and of generosity. But Master Ou-i states that "Reciting the Buddha-name can be called the number one expedient among all the expedient methods, the supreme complete truth among all the complete truths, the most perfect of all the perfect teachings." This is because reciting the Buddha-name has special practical advantages: "If you consummate any of these practices [and dedicate the merits to rebirth in the Pure Land], you will be born in the Pure Land. The method of reciting the Buddha-name is the one that is the most all-conclusive in gathering in people of all mentalities, and the one that is easiest to put into practice".

In Pure Land practice, invoking the name of Amitabha is a means to get in touch with the power of Amitabha himself. Our own feeble powers may be insufficient to bring us to the Other Shore, but Amitabha has provided us an access point through which we can reach his power, and be protected by the power of all the Buddhas.

Master Ou-i explains the essential role of Amitabha's power for Pure Land practitioners: "Amitabha is the guide of the Pure Land. By the power of his forty-eight vows, he receives the sentient beings who have vowed to practice Buddha-remembrance by invoking the Buddha-name and enables them to be born in the Land of Ultimate Bliss, and never fall back from there.

"The essential point is that everything about Amitabha is infinite: his merits and his wisdom, his supernatural powers and his power in the Path, his embodiment and his environment, his work in expounding the teachings and liberating sentient beings...

"With his great vows, Amitabha creates the causal basis for sentient beings to multiply their good roots, and with his great deeds he creates the conditions for sentient beings to increase their merits. Amitabha enables us to develop Faith and Vows and recite his name, and from moment to moment achieve these merits...

"All the adornments of Amitabha act as an augmenting substance that stimulates the development of all the adornments within the minds of sentient beings."

From a far off point in time and space, Amitabha offers the invocation of his name as a doorway to the infinite, inviting us to come through and share in the infinite life of the Buddhas.

The *Amitabha Sutra* emphasizes this point again and again as it enumerates the Buddhas of the six directions. Sakyamuni Buddha says to his listeners:

"Why do you think this is called 'the sutra that is protected and kept in mind by all the Buddhas'?

"If there are good men and good women who hear this scripture, accept it, and uphold its teachings, and they hear the names of all these Buddhas, all these good men and good women will be protected and kept in mind by all these Buddhas, and all of them will reach the level where they do not turn back from complete, unexcelled, correct enlightenment.

"Therefore, all of you should faithfully accept what I say and what all the Buddhas have said."

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Patriarch Ou-i

We owe the commentary translated below to a man who lived in the first half of the seventeenth century in China. Like all eminent Buddhist monks in China, he was known under many names. For the sake of simplicity, I will refer to him by just one of these names: Ou-i (pronounced "owe" "ee").

Master Ou-i was born into a society in the throes of social and political crisis, at a time of deep ideological divisions and self-doubt among the intelligentsia. He grew to maturity during the decay and downfall of the Ming dynasty, and lived to witness a prolonged civil war and finally the conquest of China by foreign "barbarians," the Manchus from across the northeast frontier.

By Ou-i's time, China had gone through several generations of unsettling but invigorating economic change: more trade, more mobility, more areas of life swept up into the cash economy. The entrenched imperial regime was increasingly out of touch with the needs of the society, and even with the ambitions and self-interests of the upper classes. Bitter factional struggles divided the elite political class, and the legitimacy of the whole system was called into question. New ideas, new forms of art and literature, new forms of social criticism and satire, bubbled to the surface in the turmoil.

In religion, it was an age where the five centuries old trend of "The Three Teachings Merging into One" was gathering momentum. More and more Chinese felt that the ideas and practices of Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism should be combined and used to supplement and complete each other. Popular religious leaders preached new syncretic forms of religion, and worked to bring the gist of the Buddhist, Confucian, and Taoist classics to a broader audience.

The most influential school of Confucian thought at the time was permeated by Zen Buddhist ideas. There was a new emphasis on the virtues of the common man and woman and their potential to equal the sages. A considerable fraction of Confucian gentlemen knew the language of Zen, mingled with Buddhist colleagues, and cultivated quiet-meditation and wisdom-in-action practices akin to Buddhism.

Many Buddhists turned to Taoist energy practices in an attempt to further their own religious quests. Buddhists went into elaborate internal visualizations, and exercises for opening energy channels. Tantric and Taoist influences blended into the mainstream of scriptural Buddhism and Zen to bring forth the style of Chinese Buddhism still with us today.

The vernacular literature of the time shows a strong current of skepticism towards all forms of religion, and a pervasive mistrust of authority figures of all kinds. Buddhist and Taoist monks and nuns are often portrayed as buffoons and hustlers, more interested in securing patronage and worldly favors than in anything spiritual. Confucian scholars are shown as a motley crew of conniving careerists, ruthless cynics, bankrupt idealists, and feckless dreamers. Men in power are pictured as venal, vindictive tyrants, unrestrained by any sense of justice or civic duty. People are shown going through the motions of Buddhist and Taoist practices in a half-hearted, mechanical way, not quite convinced that they will do any good, but with nowhere else to turn for relief.

For several decades before Master Ou-i came on the scene, a revival of sorts had been going on within Chinese Buddhism. There was a concerted attempt among Buddhist leaders to retrieve and reassemble the total heritage of Chinese Buddhism, the whole spectrum of formulations and teaching vehicles that had developed over the centuries. The Buddhist canon was published in handier, more affordable editions, and many collections of Zen koans were reprinted and put into circulation. There was no lack of rich and powerful patrons, and many Buddhist temples that had been ruined amidst the warfare that gave birth to the Ming dynasty in the 14th century were rebuilt in the 16th century.

For the last time in Chinese history, leading Buddhist monks from educated backgrounds were formidable figures in the intellectual life of the country, injecting Buddhist perspectives into the elite discourse of the time. But such involvement was perilous. Tzu-po Chen-k'o, the most famous Zen master in the generation before Master Ou-i, laid down his life protesting tyrannical government policies. Han-shan Te-ch'ing, another Buddhist leader, was defrocked and sent into exile when the patrons of his book printing and temple restoration projects were put on the defensive in court political intrigue.

Master Ou-i's life mirrors the unease of his time. It was a lifetime of intense spiritual struggle, marked by many personal crises and searching reevaluations of his practice. Over the course of his life, Ou-i tirelessly investigated one stream after another of Buddhist methodology and theory, searching for the key to attainment in a time and place when genuine teachers and sincere companions in the path were hard to find.

As a teenager, like other boys from well-off families, Ou-i was immersed in Confucian studies, in preparation for passing the exams that opened the way to enter the imperial bureaucracy, the most prestigious of all careers in the society. He even wrote anti-Buddhist essays, in the fashion of the school of Confucianism orthodox in government eyes -- essays that he later burned.

At twenty he felt a breakthrough as he was studying the *Analects* of Confucius: he felt that he had understood the mind of Confucius. The same year Ou-i's father died.

Ou-i now moved beyond the static normative philosophy of the orthodox Confucianism of Chu Hsi [d. 1200], which openly condemned Buddhism as amoral and immoral. He delved into the more dynamic streams of Confucianism inspired by Wang Yang-ming [d. 1528], which had incorporated many perspectives from Zen Buddhism.

In his early twenties Ou-i began to practice Zen. He left home and became a monk at the age of twenty-four, guiding his meditation with the *Surangama Sutra.* He got dramatic results and felt that the meanings of the sutras and of the Zen sayings had all become obvious. But he told no one about this, since he did not think he had attained the ultimate level. Ou-i admitted that at this time in his life, like many intellectuals before and since, he felt that Pure Land methods were beneath him, and fit only for the common people.

Ou-i became gravely ill when he was twenty-eight, after his mother had died a lingering death. He found to his dismay that his previous realization did him no good when faced with a life-and-death crisis. From this point on, Ou-i combined Buddha-name recitation with his Zen practice. Such combined practice was a long-established trend in Chinese Buddhism. The premise was that reciting the Buddha-name was the functional equivalent of Zen meditation, providing an easier, and thus for most people more effective way to samadhi. After his mother passed away, Ou-i spent two years in seclusion pursuing the combined practice of Zen and Pure Land.

At thirty-one, Ou-i encountered a famous Zen teacher who showed him how degenerate Zen practice had become in their time. After this Ou-i turned away from Zen forms altogether: though he always acknowledged the genuine realization of the Zen masters, he had decided that Zen methods were too difficult for most people to follow, and that Zen in his time was mostly an intellectual plaything.

Ou-i now devoted his energy more and more to Pure Land practice. At the same time, he did research on the Vinaya (the monastic codes of discipline), and read widely in the Buddhist scriptures and philosophical treatises. He made a deep study of T'ien-t'ai philosophy, a systematic synthesis of Mahayana Buddhism developed in sixth century China.. Ou-i clearly felt no sense of incongruity between Pure Land Buddhism and the Buddhism of the sutras and shastras. His commentary on the *Amitabha Sutra* often uses T'ien-t'ai categories, and is firmly based on the ontology of Yogacara philosophy.

In his thirties, Ou-i became fascinated with the practice of chanting mantras, special sequences of sounds to connect the practitioner to higher realities. He devoted himself to the mantra of Ti-tsang (Ksitigarbha), the Bodhisattva particularly associated with bringing salvation to beings in hell. During the period when the Mongols ruled China and patronized Tibetan Buddhism, the Tantric Buddhist practice of chanting mantras had been absorbed into popular Chinese Buddhism, where mantras were regarded as magical spells that could protect their users or even bring them supernatural powers.

But as Ou-i pursued his studies, he learned that Tantric Buddhism discourages the random use of mantras as potentially dangerous, and in fact demands extremely rigorous discipline as a prerequisite for the use mantras, to safeguard against mantra-practice amplifying faults and distorting perceptions. Ou-i stopped teaching mantras to others, and restricted his own recitation practice to the Buddha-name, *the one universally safe invocation*.

In his late thirties, Master Ou-i became more and more a public teacher. He lectured and wrote extensively, explaining the sutras and shastras. This was the period when the Ming dynasty entered its death spiral, as peasant rebels routed the imperial forces throughout North China, and the Manchu armies stood poised to invade from the Northeast. Master Ou-i himself was in the Yangtse River delta region, which for the time being was still safe from these political upheavals.

Despite his own preference for Pure Land methods, Master Ou-i had a completely non-sectarian view of the different forms of Buddhism: "The potentials and circumstances of sentient beings all differ, and so all different forms of the Buddhist Teaching have been devised, some open, some closed, using all sorts of terminology. The Teaching is expressed effectively to all sentient beings according to what they are ready to hear." At the age of thirty-nine he had a great revelation and saw that the differences between Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism only existed because all three teachings were just expedient means, adapted to different needs.

Another serious illness that struck when he was forty-six prompted Master Ou-i to reconsider his own Buddhist practice, and devote himself completely to Pure Land practice. In his final fifteen years of his life he produced a remarkable volume of scholarship, authoring some seventy-five works in which he explicated not only the major Buddhist sutras and shastras, but also various Confucian classics, and even the *Book of Change*. His commentary on the *Amitabha Sutra* was written when he was forty-nine, in the space of nine days.

Master Ou-i died in 1656, at the age of fifty-seven. The story goes that in his last testament he had instructed his disciples to collect his bones after the cremation, grind them up, mix them with flour, and bake them into cakes to be scattered around the mountain for the birds and beasts to eat, so they could form a karmic link with the Buddhist Teachings. The disciples did not have the heart to follow their master's wishes, and instead enshrined his bones beside the great hall at Lingfeng Temple.

Master Ou-i's Commentary on the Amitabha Sutra

Master Ou-i wrote his explanation of the Amitabha Sutra not as an intellectual exercise, but to provide a practical service to Pure Land believers. In his own words:

"My hope is that every line and every word of this commentary will serve as resource materials ("life provisions") for Pure Land practitioners, and that as soon as they read or hear what is written in this work, they will progress together to the point where there is no falling back from the path to enlightenment."

In his commentary Master Ou-i explained the Pure Land teaching in terms of the Buddhist philosophy of "Mind Only". There is only one reality: Dharmakaya Buddha, the Buddha-Mind, the One Mind. All things are just waves, ripples, evanescent bubbles, appearing in the ocean of this One Mind: all worlds, all Buddhas, all sentient beings, all times, all places, all worlds, all the lived experiences of all beings in all worlds in all times.

Note how the One Mind worldview emphasizes our link to the absolute, without effacing our individuality. The Buddha-Mind is all that exists, but we too have Buddha-nature, and our own personal little minds are permeated by the Buddha-Mind, even if we do not recognize it. All that ignorance, delusion, and bad karma can do is screen us off from an awareness of our True Nature, our Buddha-nature, our essential integration in the One Mind. But when we use our petty little minds to assess or to access the One Mind, it is literally like ladling out the ocean in a teacup. This is where the compassionate expedient means of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas come to our rescue. All true Buddhist teachings are situation-specific channels designed to bring us to the realization of the One Mind. The true Buddhist teachings vary in form and application, but are one in intent.

In his commentary Master Ou-i constantly refers to the fact that the apparently wondrous and even unbelievable powers of reciting Amitabha's name are inherent in our connection to the One Mind. "We must realize that there is no name of Amitabha apart from the mind of infinite light and infinite life that is before us now at this moment, and there is no way for us to penetrate the mind of infinite light and infinite life that is before us now at this moment apart from the name of Amitabha. I hope you will ponder this deeply!"

The connectivity of the One Mind is the key to resolving the typical objections skeptics raise to Pure Land ideas:

"Question: If Amitabha's Pure Land is a hundred billion worlds away from here, how can we be reborn there instantly?

"Answer: A hundred billion worlds are not beyond this moment of the True Nature of Mind that is before us right now, since fundamentally there is nothing outside the True Nature of Mind. When we rely on the power of Buddha that is inherent in our own mind, what is so hard about being born in the Pure Land instantly?"

Master Ou-i constantly brings the matter back to practicalities. The aim is to get in touch with the One Mind, which is omnipresent but commonly inaccessible to people -- the means are judged according to what is effective.

"Reciting the Buddha-name at the level of inner truth means believing that Amitabha's Pure Land in the West is an inherent feature of our own minds, the creation of our own minds. It means using the great name of Amitabha, which is inherent in our minds and the creation of our minds, as a focal point to concentrate our minds on, so that we never forget it for a moment."

Master Ou-i stresses that it is precisely because the One Mind is all-pervasive that ordinary people can reach the Pure Land. He says that by reciting the Buddha-name, "You merge with Buddha from moment to moment, without bothering with visualization or meditation, and [by doing so] you immediately witness perfect illumination, with no excess and no lack. Those of the highest faculties cannot go beyond this level, while those of the lowest capabilities are also able to reach it. Of course the way Amitabha appears to people and the level of the Pure Land into which they are born is not the same [for those of different faculties]."

At another point, Master Ou-i takes a step further in pointing out where Amitabha's Pure Land figures in the scheme of interpenetrating worlds through which the One Mind is revealed: "Why do we have to wait until our life in the mundane world is over before we can be born in the Pure Land's jewel ponds? All we have to do is to develop Faith and Vows and recite the Buddha-name right now, and the lotus bud in which we will be born in the Pure Land is already in bloom, and the image of the Pure Land's golden dais appear before us -- at that moment we are no longer inhabitants of this mundane world."

The urgent concern that Ou-i expresses throughout the commentary is that people should actually have faith in Amitabha, vow to reach the Pure Land, and begin reciting the Buddha-name. "If we think that there is some other method besides Pure Land practice that can extricate us from our corrupt world, we are lost in a welter of empty arguments inside a burning house."

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A perennial question in Pure Land communities is how the practitioner's state of mind affects the effectiveness of Buddha-name recitation. Master Ou-i stresses that perfectly focused recitation, coupled with faith and vows, is the optimum practice, but reminds us that even reciting the Buddha-name in a scattered state of mind still plants seeds of future attainment. His comments offer a mix of warning and encouragement. Here are three samples:

> "Reciting the Buddha-name with a scattered mind does not guarantee being reborn in the Pure Land, since a good thing done in a diffuse, scattered way is no match for the evils that have accumulated from time without beginning."

> "The only way [to eliminate bad karma] is to recite the Buddha-name until the mind is unified and undisturbed in Buddha-remembrance. Then it is like a powerful warrior breaking out of an encirclement, so even three armies cannot hem him in any more. Invoking the Buddha-name is a seed for becoming enlightened. It is like an indestructible diamond."

> "Even if you invoke the Buddha-name in a scattered state of mind, the merits and good roots are still incalculable -- how much the more so when you invoke the Buddha name with a unified mind that is not in chaos!"

As always, the "answer" depends on the point of view and the level of truth in which the answer is operating.

On one level -- shall we say the level of conventional reality, the level of our lives as sentient beings and Buddhist practitioners -- we must recite the Buddha-name to the point that our minds become unified and unconfused before we can be protected and kept in mind by the Buddhas, as the sutra promises.

On another level, the level of absolute reality and the One Mind, as Master Ou-i points out, "The compassion of the Buddhas is inconceivable, and the merits of their names are also inconceivable. Therefore, once you hear a Buddha-name, no matter whether you are mindful or not, or whether you believe in it or not, it always becomes the seed of an affinity with the truth. Moreover, when the Buddhas bring salvation to sentient beings, they do not sort out friends and enemies: they go on working tirelessly for universal salvation. If you hear the Buddha-name, Buddha is bound to protect you. How can there be any doubts about this?"

Perhaps looking back over the twists and turns of his own religious quest, and looking ahead to his own approaching demise, Master Ou-i saw the moment of death as as a key test of what a person has achieved in the work of the spirit. If the momentum of deluded habits and attachments still remains, he warns, it will drag us off into further suffering in future births. For the final time, Master Ou-i exhorts his readers to come to their senses and believe the message of the sutra:

"The only way out is to develop faith and vows and recite the Buddha-name, and rely on the power of an outside Buddha to help our own Buddha. Amitabha's vows of compassion are certainly not empty promises. If we develop faith and vows and recite the Buddha-name, when we die Amitabha and the assembly of saints will appear before us to lead us away. That way we will achieve an undisturbed mind and be free to be reborn in the Pure Land."[5]

MIND-SEAL OF THE BUDDHAS

(COMMENTARY ON THE AMITABHA SUTRA)

by

Patriarch Ou-i

Realms of worlds in empty space might reach an end,
And living beings, karma and afflictions be extinguished;
But they will never be exhausted,
And neither will my vows.

The Vows of Samantabhadra
Avatamsaka Sutra

[ESSENCE OF THE SUTRA]

The Buddhas took pity on the multitudes of deluded sentient beings, and put forth transformative teachings according to the various potentials of these deluded sentient beings. Although these teachings all derive from the same source, many different expedient methods are employed.

Among all these expedients, if we seek the most direct and the most complete, none is a good as seeking birth in the Pure Land through Buddha-remembrance (Buddha recitation). *If we seek the simplest and most reliable among all the methods of Buddha-remembrance, the best is to develop faith and vows and to concentrate on reciting the Buddha-name.*[6]

This is the reason that the ancients took the *Amitabha Sutra* as their daily study guide, though three Pure Land scriptures have circulated side by side in the world over the generations.[7] The *Amitabha Sutra* shows that the method of reciting the Buddha-name applies to people of high, medium, and limited capacities. It encompasses both the level of phenomena, and the level of inner truth (noumenon), omitting nothing. It embraces both Zen Buddhism and Scriptural Buddhism, and leaves nothing out. This method is indeed inconceivably great![8]

Over the generations, since ancient times, there has been no lack of people to comment upon and explain the *Amitabha Sutra*. Over time, many of these commentaries have fallen into oblivion and nowadays not many survive. [A generation ago], Master Chu-hung of Yun-ch'i wrote his extensive and subtle commentary, and my own teacher's Master, Yu-hsi, wrote *Complete Middle Path Commentary*, which is profound and highly learned. [These two commentaries] are like the sun and the moon: all those with eyes see them. But [in these two commentaries] the literary style is elaborate and the levels of meaning are complex. Their ultimate reaches are unfathomable.

Therefore I have put aside all qualms about my own mediocrity and ignorance and composed another commentary, explaining the essential points of the *Amitabha Sutra*. I would not dare to diverge from elders Chu-hung and Yu-hsi just to be original, nor would I force myself to agree with them for the sake of agreement. When I look upon their example, it is as if lofty peaks surround me. Even though my commentary in no way fully describes the true realm of the Pure Land tradition, I must not fail to give every one of you a personal vision of it.

When one explicates the text of the *Amitabha Sutra*, there are five layers of profound meaning:

First, there is the title of the sutra to explain.

[This scripture is called *The Amitabha Sutra Spoken by Buddha.]* This sutra takes its title from the one who expounds it and from the one of whom he speaks.

Buddha is the master teacher, the one who expounds the scripture in this world, that is, Sakyamuni. By the power of his vows of great compassion, he was born here in the world of the Five Turbidities. As the one who was first to awaken, his mission was to bring enlightenment to those who were to awaken later. Buddha is the one who knows all and sees all.

Buddha speaks the sutra with joy in his heart. Buddha's intention is to liberate sentient beings. Since the potential of sentient beings to achieve enlightenment is ripe, Buddha expounds for them these Pure Land teachings which are difficult to believe, and enables his listeners to reach ultimate liberation. That's why he is filled with joy.

Amitabha Buddha is the one Sakyamuni refers to in the sutra. Amitabha is the guide of the Pure Land. By the power of his forty-eight vows, he receives the sentient beings who have vowed to practice Buddha-remembrance by invoking the Buddha-name and enables them to be born in the Land of Ultimate Bliss, and never fall back from there. The Sanskrit name "Amitabha" means "Infinite Life" and also "Infinite Light". The essential point is that everything about him is infinite: his merits and his wisdom, his supernatural powers and his power in the Path, his embodiment and his environment, his work in expounding the Buddhist teachings and liberating sentient beings.

A sutra is any teaching from the golden mouth of a Buddha.[9]

These terms taken together make up the title of the scripture: *The Amitabha Sutra Spoken by Buddha.* The three categories -- *teachings, practices, and inner truth (noumenon)*, which each sutra should have -- can each be explained in both general and particular senses, as set out in the T'ien-t'ai system.

Second, there is the essence of the sutra to discern.

The true essence of all the Great Vehicle (Mahayana) scriptures is Absolute Reality (Real Mark) itself. What is Absolute Reality? It is the Pure Mind of sentient beings.[10] This mind is not inside, not outside, and not in-between. It is not past, not present, and not future. It is not green or yellow or red or white, long or short or square or round. It is not a scent, not a flavor, not a texture, not a mental object. When we search for it we cannot find it, but we cannot say it does not exist. It creates all worlds and all realms, but we cannot say it exists. It is detached from conditioned thoughts and discriminations, from all words and characteristics, but conditioned thoughts and discriminations and worlds and characteristics do not have any separate identity apart from it.

Essentially, absolute reality is detached from all characteristics, but merged with all phenomena. Being detached from characteristics, it is formless, and being merged with all phenomena, it gives them all their forms. For lack of an alternative, we impose on it the name "absolute reality" [i.e., Mind, Real Mark, Buddha Nature].

The essence of Absolute Reality is neither quiescent nor aware, but it is both quiescent and yet ever shining with awareness, both shining with awareness and yet ever quiescent. In that it is shining with awareness but quiescent, it is called the Land of Eternally Quiescent Light. In that it is quiescent but shining with awareness, it is called the pure Dharmakaya (Dharma Body). Aware quiescence is called the Dharmakaya, the Dharma Body of all the Buddhas. Quiescent awareness is called the Sambhogakaya, the Reward Body.

[For the Buddhas] quiescence and awareness are not two, bodies and lands are not two, what is inherent and what is cultivated are not two, true essence and responsive function are not two -- everything is absolute reality. Reality and appearances are *neither two nor not two*.

Therefore, the essence of reality as a whole acts as both the *environment* that surrounds sentient beings and as their very *bodies*. It acts as both the Dharma Body and the Reward Body of the Buddhas. It acts as both self and others.

Thus the one who speaks the sutra and the one who is spoken of, the Buddhas that can deliver sentient beings and the sentient beings who are delivered, the ability to believe and that which is believed in, the ability to take vows and that which is vowed, the ability to concentrate on the Buddha-name and the Buddha-name which is concentrated upon, the ability to be born in the Pure Land and birth in the Pure Land itself, the ability to praise the Buddhas and the Buddhas who are praised -- all of these are the imprint of the "true seal" of Absolute Reality. In other words, the True Mind (Bodhi Mind) of sentient beings is the essence of all Mahayana sutras.

Third, there is the guiding principle to explain.

The guiding principle is the essential route for cultivating practice, the key link for understanding the essence [of our mind], the guiding framework for the myriad practices. When you hold up a net, the mesh opens up. When you lift the collar of a shirt, the breast and sleeves come too. Thus, after explaining the essence of the sutra, we must discern the guiding principle.

The essential principle for cultivation in this sutra is to *develop faith and vows and to recite the Buddha-name.* Without faith, we are not sufficiently equipped to take vows. Without vows, we are not sufficiently equipped to guide our practice. Without the wondrous practice of reciting the Buddha-name, we are not sufficiently equipped to fulfill our vows and to bring our faith to fruition.

The sutra first sets forth the pure environment of the Land and the exalted bodies of its inhabitants in order to engender *faith* in us. Next it urges us to take *vows* to give guidance to our practice. Then it teaches the *practice* of reciting the Buddha-name as the route of direct ascent with no falling back (non-retrogression).

Faith means having faith in oneself and faith in others (Buddha and Bodhisattvas). It means being sure about cause and effect, about phenomena and inner truth (noumenon).

Vows mean feeling aversion to the mundane world and detaching from it. Vows mean gladly seeking the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss.

Practice means persisting in the practice of reciting the Buddha-name *singlemindedly and without confusion* (with one-pointedness of mind).

[*Faith*]. *Believing in ourselves* means believing that the True Mind is not a physical manifestation, and not the reflection of entangling objects, that it extends through time without any before or after and through space without any boundaries. Though it follows causal conditions all day long, it never changes.

All of space in the Ten Directions and all the worlds countless as atoms are originally things created by this Mind of ours. Although we are deluded and confused, if for a single moment we return to this Mind, we are sure to be born in the Land of Ultimate Bliss originally inherent in our own mind, and be troubled no more by worry and doubt. This is called "believing in ourselves".

Believing in others means having faith that the Tathagata Sakyamuni certainly did not lie, and that the World Honored One Amitabha certainly did not take his vows in vain. It means being certain that all the Buddhas of all the directions never equivocated, and it means following the true teachings of all the enlightened ones. It means establishing our will to seek birth in the Pure Land, and being prey no more to doubt and confusion. This is called "believing in others".

Believing in the causal basis means having faith that even Buddha-name invocation carried out in a scattered confused state of mind is still a seed of enlightenment, and that this is even more true of invoking the Buddha-name singlemindedly and without confusion. [If we sincerely and singlemindedly invoke the name of Amitabha Buddha], how can we fail to be born in the Pure Land? This is called "believing in the causal basis", i.e., that recitation is the cause of enlightenment.

Believing in the result means having deep faith that all the spiritually superior beings assembled in the Pure Land have practiced the Buddha Remembrance Samadhi, the meditative concentration that comes from reciting the Buddha-name. When you plant melon seeds you get melons, and when you plant beans you get beans. [Effect follows causes] like a shadow follows a physical shape, like an echo responds to a sound. Nothing is sown in vain. This is called "believing in the result".

Believing factual phenomena means having deep faith that although this mind of ours is ephemeral, the worlds of the Ten Directions based on it are inexhaustible. The Land of Ultimate Bliss really does exist ten billion Buddha-lands away, adorned with ultimate pure adornments. This is not some fable from Chuang-tzu. This is called "believing factual phenomena".

Believing in inner truth (noumenon) means having deep faith that the ten billions Buddha-lands (worlds) are in reality not outside our Mind. Since there is really nothing outside of this Mind, we have deep certainty that the whole assembly of beings and surroundings in the Western Paradise is a set of reflections appearing in our mind. All phenomena are merged with inner truth, all falsity is merged with truth. All practices are merged with True Nature. All others are merged with oneself. Our own inherent mind is all-pervasive, and the Buddha-mind is also all-pervasive, and the true nature of the minds of sentient beings is also all-pervasive. It is like a thousand lamps in one room, each of whose light shines on all the others and merges with the other lights without any obstruction. This is called "believing in inner truth" (Noumenon).

[*Vows*]. Once we have these forms of faith, then we must understand that the mundane world is the defilement brought about by our own minds, and we must detach from it; the Pure Land is the purity brought about by our own minds, and we must joyously seek it.[11] We must renounce defilement utterly, until there is nothing that can be renounced, and we must grasp purity utterly, until there is nothing that can be grasped.

Therefore the commentary *Miao-tsung* said:

> If you take grasping and rejecting to the limit, they are not in a different groove than not grasping and not rejecting. If you do not engage in grasping and rejecting, and only value *not* grasping and *not* rejecting, this is a form of clinging to inner truth and abandoning phenomena. If you neglect the phenomenal level, then you are not complete at the inner truth level. If you arrive at the point where all phenomena are merged with inner truth, then both grasping and rejecting are also merged with inner truth. Sometimes grasping, sometimes rejecting, nothing is not the Realm of Reality.

[*Practice*]. When we speak of concentrating on the Buddha-name singlemindedly, we are referring to recitation with a mind that is unified and not chaotic.[12] To invoke the Buddha-name is to invoke the qualities of Buddhahood. Since the qualities of Buddhahood are inconceivable, the Buddha-name itself is also inconceivable. *Thus, even if we recite the Buddha-name in a scattered state of mind, it is still a seed of enlightenment, while those who recite singlemindedly immediately ascend toward enlightenment without falling back.*

Many sutras teach Pure Land practices of various kinds: contemplating the image of Buddha, contemplating the concept of Buddha, doing prostrations, making offerings, practicing the five forms of repentance and the six forms of mindfulness, and so on. If you consummate any of these practices, and dedicate the merits toward rebirth in the Pure Land, you will be born there.

The method of reciting the Buddha-name is the one that is all-inclusive, embracing people of all mentalities and the one that is easiest to practice. This is why the compassionate one, Sakyamuni Buddha, explained it to Shariputra without being asked. *Reciting the Buddha-name can be called the number one expedient among all the expedient methods, the supreme complete truth among all the complete truths, the most perfect of all the perfect teachings.*

There is a saying: "If a *purifying pearl* is put into dirty water, the dirty water cannot but be purified. If the Buddha-name is put into a chaotic mind, even that chaotic mind cannot fail to become enlightened." Reciting the

Buddha-name with faith and vows is a true cause for the Supreme Vehicle. The Four Pure Lands [the Land Where Saints and Ordinary Beings Dwell Together, the Land of Expedient Liberation, the Land of Real Reward, and the Land of Eternally Quiescent Light] are the wondrous fruits of the Supreme Vehicle. If you have the causal basis, then the result is sure to follow.

Therefore, faith, vows and reciting the Buddha-name are the true guiding principles of the *Amitabha Sutra*.

The characteristics of the four Pure Lands are described in detail in the *Miao-tsung* commentary and in the book *An explanation of the Brahma Net Sutra*, and I will not explain them in full here. Later on I will give a brief account of them as I explicate the text.

Fourth, there is the sutra's function.

The powerful function of this sutra is to enable us to be reborn in the Pure Land and never fall back. Rebirth in the Pure Land can be categorized in terms of the Four Pure Lands, and also into *nine lotus grades* in each Land. Here I will give a brief explanation of the characteristics of the Four Lands.

If you recite the Buddha-name without cutting off your Delusions of Views and Thoughts, depending on how scattered or how concentrated you are, you are reborn within the nine lotus grades of the Land Where Saints and Ordinary Beings Live Together.

If you recite the Buddha-name to the point of singlemindedness (phenomenal level), your Delusions of Views and Thoughts are cut off and you are reborn in the

Land of Expedient Liberation of Arhats and Pratyeka Buddhas.

If you recite the Buddha-name to the point of singlemindedness (noumenon or inner truth level), and you smash from one to forty-one levels of ignorance and delusion, then you are born in the Land of Real Reward where Bodhisattvas live.

However, if you recite the Buddha-name to the point where *all* forty-two levels of ignorance and delusion are totally cut off, this is the highest reward and you will be reborn in the Land of Eternally Quiescent Light where the Buddhas dwell.

The *Amitabha Sutra* has this kind of powerful function, which no text can describe. The powerful function of the *Amitabha Sutra* should not be mentioned on the same day as the [far more pessimistic teaching] that lifetime after lifetime of cultivation (with all the dangers of retrogression) is necessary before you can expect enlightenment. How can Zen Buddhists and Scriptural Buddhists fail to consider this?

Fifth, there are the forms of the Buddhist teaching in this sutra to explain.

The sutra is contained in the Mahayana canon, Bodhisattva vehicle, and is "self-spoken" -- delivered by the Buddha without being asked.

This sutra enables sentient beings with many karmic obstructions who live in the Dharma-Ending Age to make a direct ascent toward enlightenment without falling back.

Thus, in the future when all the other sutras have perished, only this *Amitabha Sutra* will survive for another century, to bring deliverance on a wide scale to sentient beings.

The *Amitabha Sutra* is a remedy for all sicknesses. It is beyond relativities, a perfect fusion, with inconceivable power. The mystic treasury of the *Flower Ornament (Avatamsaka) Sutra*, the secret gist of the *Lotus Sutra*, the essential teachings on mind of all the Buddhas, the compass of all the Bodhisattvas' myriad practices -- none of them is outside of this sutra. If I wanted to praise it at length, at the end of time I still would not be finished. Those with wisdom must know this sutra for themselves.

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[EXPLANATION OF THE TEXT]

The text of the sutra is divided into three sections. The first is the introduction. The second is the main body of the text, which gives the correct guiding principles and the third is the history of the transmission of the text. These three parts are called the excellent opening, the excellent middle, and the excellent ending.

The introduction is like the head, complete with eyes, ears, and nose. The main body of the text is like the body, complete with all the internal organs. The transmission history is like the hands and feet, which move unimpeded.

In sum, the introduction covers the overall structure of the sutra, while the transmission history shows that the bestowal of the teaching has been unimpeded. The connection of these two portions with the main body of the sutra is not a minor matter. Lately people have not understood this. When they read the sutras, they delve a bit into its principles, then plunge into the main body of the text, treating the introduction and the transmission history as if they were empty formulas. If this were true, why are we told that both the opening words and the closing words of a sutra are also excellent?

[Introductory portion of sutra]

The introductory portion of the *Amitabha Sutra* first reveals the time and place of the Dharma assembly at which the sutra was expounded, and then describes the assembly of those who were present.

> **Thus have I heard: Once Buddha was in the land of Shravasti, in the garden of Jeta and Anathapindika.**

This section describes the assembly where the Pure Land doctrine was taught. They are the words of Ananda [the Buddha's personal assistant], who recorded the sutra.

"Thus have I heard" expresses Ananda's faithful obedience to what he was receiving from our teacher

Sakyamuni. "Once" describes the moment the teaching was given. "Buddha" is the teacher. "The Garden of Jeta and Anathapindika", in the land of Shravasti, is the place where Buddha preached this sutra.

The essence of Mind (Real Mark) has not changed from ancient times to modern. If we recite the Buddha-name to seek birth in the Pure Land, basing ourselves upon the essence of absolute reality (Mind), we will definitely not go wrong. When the sutra begins "Thus have I heard" it attests that this is a correct teaching.

Absolute reality is not self and it is not no-self. Ananda in saying "Thus have I heard" as he recited the sutra had not done away with the false self, and so he still says "I". Ananda's ears produced auditory consciousness, so he could personally hear the perfect voice of Sakyamuni Buddha preaching this sutra -- this was like *emptiness sealing emptiness.* It is in this sense that Ananda "heard" the sutra.

"Once Buddha was in the land of Shravasti" the sutra continues. "Once" means at the time when the paths of teacher and students, of Sakyamuni Buddha and his audience, joined, and a full sharing of preaching and listening took place.

"Buddha" is the name for one who has been enlightened and who brings enlightenment to others, whose enlightened practice is complete and who functions as the great teacher of humans and gods.

The place name "Shravasti" in Sanskrit means "hearing things". It was the name of a great kingdom in

India, and also of its main city, King Prasenajit's capital during the time of Sakyamuni Buddha. The King's Crown Prince was called Jeta, which means "Victorious in Battle". A senior minister of the king, Sudatta, was also called Anathapindika which means "Benefactor of Widows and Orphans". Anathapindika paid for Prince Jeta's garden in gold, and donated it to Buddha and his monks. Prince Jeta was very moved, and donated the trees in that parcel of land. Thus the double name [for the site where Buddha preached the sutra]: "the Garden of Jeta and Anathapindika".[13]

Next the sutra describes the assembly who came to hear Buddha preach. There were three groups: first, the group of monastic disciples (Arhats), second, the group of Bodhisattvas, and third, the congregation of humans and gods.

Why are the monastic disciples put first? Because they had left behind worldly forms, because they always accompanied the Buddha, and because the Buddha Dharma depends on monks and nuns to spread it.

Why are the Bodhisattvas placed in the middle? Because their forms are not fixed, because they do not always accompany the Buddha, and also in order to suggest the idea of the Middle Path.

Why are the humans and gods placed last? Because they have worldly form, because they are a mixed lot, including both ordinary people and sages, and because their role is to support and protect Buddhism on the outside.

There are three aspects to the description of the monastic disciples: first, an account of their quality and number; second, praise for their high standing and virtues; and third, a list of the foremost among them. The sutra reads:

> **He was accompanied by twelve hundred and fifty great bhikshus...**

"Bhikshu" is a Sanskrit term with a triple meaning.

First, "bhikshu" means a mendicant, someone who has just a single bowl to his name, accumulates nothing, and relies exclusively on alms for the necessities of life.

Second, "bhikshu" means someone who strives to destroy the evil of afflictions and avoid perceptions molded by desire.

Third, "bhikshu" means someone who has accepted the full set of 250 disciplinary precepts and abandoned mundane preoccupations. He is said to give fright to demons.

The word for the monastic community as a whole, "Sangha", means a harmonious association. This harmony at the level of inner truth means sharing the understanding of the truth of transcendental liberation. At the phenomenal level, harmony means dwelling together without rancorous speech, with the same joyful intent, and the same understanding, sharing the same precepts and sharing material goods equally.

The sutra speaks of twelve hundred and fifty bhikshus. The three brothers Kashyapa had together a thousand disciples, Sariputra and Maudgalyayana had two hundred and Yasha had fifty. These were all people who had become Buddha's disciples shortly after his enlightenment, people who felt deep gratitude for Buddha's benevolence and followed him everywhere.

[The sutra continues:]

all of them great Arhats, well known to everyone.

The word "Arhat" also has three meanings. *First*, it represents one who is worthy of offerings, as the result of being a mendicant [when he was a bhikshu]. *Second*, it means a slayer of evil, as the result of having destroyed afflictions. *Third*, it means one who is no longer subject to Birth and Death. It also means one who is wise and liberated, one who is liberated from doubt.

All these great Arhats are great beings belonging to the Dharmakaya (i.e. great Bodhisattvas), who expediently take the appearance of monastic disciples of the Buddha. They have realized the inconceivable reality of this Pure Land teaching, and so they are called "great". They accompanied the Buddha as he turned the Wheel of the

Dharma, bringing benefits to all the realms of humans and gods, and so they were "well known to all".

Now the sutra lists the leaders of the Arhats:

> **Among them were his leading disciples, such figures as the Elders Shariputra, Mahamaudgalyayana, Mahakashyapa, Mahakatyayana, and Mahakausthila, Revata, Suddhipanthaka, Nanda, Ananda, Rahula, Gavampati, Pindola-bharadvaja, Kalodayin, Mahakapphina, Vakula, and Aniruddha, etc., all great disciples.**

"Elder" is the term given to those who are honored both for their virtue and their long years as monks.

Among the Buddha's Arhat disciples, the Venerable Shariputra was the foremost in wisdom and the Venerable Maudgalyayana was foremost in supernatural powers.

The Venerable Mahakashyapa's body shone with a golden light: he transmitted the Buddha's Mind Seal and became the first patriarch of the Zen tradition. He was foremost among the Buddha's monastic disciples in ascetic practices.

The Venerable Mahakatyayana was of a Brahmanical lineage, and was foremost in debate.

The Venerable Mahakausthila was foremost in question-and-answer dialogue.

The Venerable Revata was the foremost in remaining free of error and confusion.

The Venerable Suddhipanthaka had been dull by nature but through memorizing two words of the sutras [sweep clean, i.e., sweep the mind clean], his eloquence became limitless and he was the foremost in upholding the truth of Real Mark.

The Venerable Nanda was Buddha's own younger brother, and was foremost in formal comportment.

The Venerable Ananda was Buddha's cousin, and served as his personal attendant: he was the most learned and always committed the Buddha's spoken teachings to memory.

The Venerable Rahula was Buddha's son and heir from the time when the Buddha was a royal prince, and he was the foremost in never advertising his cultivation.

The Venerable Gavampati had spoken evil in past lives, and was affected by the karmic retribution for this by having a voice like a snorting ox: he was foremost in receiving the offerings of the gods.

The Venerable Pindola-bharadvaja broke the rule against displaying spiritual powers and was told to remain in this world for a long time. He was foremost as a field of blessings for sentient beings.

The Venerable Kalodayin was Buddha's emissary, and he was foremost in spreading the teaching.

The Venerable Mahakapphina was the foremost in knowledge of astronomy.

The Venerable Vakula was the longest lived of Buddha's monastic disciples.

The Venerable Aniruddha was another of Buddha's cousins, and he was foremost in the magical ability of his celestial eye.

Fundamentally, all these constant companions of the Buddha were Boddhisattvas belonging to the Dharmakaya, who just manifested themselves as monastic disciples of the Buddha -- to spread the Buddha's teaching.

Now they were to hear of the all-encompassing merits of the Pure Land, and gain the benefits of the supreme truth. Giving their lives to benefit the Path, they purified the Buddha-lands. Thus they are called an appropriate audience for the occasion.

Now the sutra describes the group of Bodhisattvas in the assembly:

> **Also present were the Bodhisattvas-Mahasattvas: Manjushri, Prince of the Dharma; the Bodhisattva Ajita, the Invincible; the Bodhisattvas Gandhahastin and Nityodyukta, and other such great Bodhisattvas..**

"Bodhisattva-mahasattva" in Sanskrit means a great Boddhisattva, a sentient being whose Bodhi Mind is fully developed, in whom compassion and wisdom are operating in tandem to benefit both self and others.[14]

Buddha is the King of the Dharma. Manjushri continued the vocation of teaching wisdom, so he is called the Prince of the Dharma. Among the Bodhisattvas, he is foremost in wisdom. Without fearless genuine wisdom, you cannot truly understand the Pure Land teaching, and so Manjushri is put first in the assembly of Bodhisattvas hearing the *Amitabha Sutra*.

The Bodhisattva Ajita is Maitreya. In the future he will become a Buddha, but now he is at the stage of Equal Enlightenment.

Next the sutra lists the Bodhisattvas Gandhahastin and Nityodyukta, because they are the ones who have cultivated practice for eons without ever stopping, making constant progress, tirelessly benefitting self and others.

These Bodhisattvas of high rank must all seek birth in the Pure Land, so that they will not be separated from seeing the Buddha, hearing the Dharma and giving offerings in person to the Sangha, in order that they may quickly perfect the Bodhi Mind and achieve Supreme Enlightenment. [See the vows of Samantabhadra, *Avatamsaka Sutra*, ch. 40.]

> **Also present was Shakra, the king of the gods, along with countless numbers of heavenly beings, making up a great assembly.**

The name "Shakra" means "the one who can be lord" (also known as Indra); he is the king of the Trayastrimsha Heaven, the Heaven of Thirty-Three. Below his heaven are the heavens of the four deva-kings. Above are the Heaven of Yama, the Tushita Heaven, the Nirmanarati Heaven, the Paranirmita Heaven, the heavens of form, the formless heavens, and innumerable other heavens.

"Making up a great assembly" means that there were also other gods, asuras, and other supernatural beings from all the worlds of the Ten Directions in attendance (to hear Buddha expound the Amitabha Sutra), and that all had the potential to benefit from the Pure Land teaching.

Thus ends the general introduction to the sutra. Next comes the particular introduction.

The wondrous gate of the Pure Land is inconceivable, and no one was able to ask about it, so Buddha took it upon himself to begin by extolling its name. Moreover, given that the Buddha is able to evaluate the potentials of sentient beings unerringly, he saw that this great assembly ought to hear about the wondrous gate of the Pure Land so they could gain benefits. Therefore, he did not wait for questions, but began by himself.

> **At that time Buddha said to the Elder Shariputra: "West of here, past a hundred billion Buddha-lands, there exists a world called *Ultimate Bliss*. In this land there is a Buddha called Amitabha, who is preaching the Dharma right now."**

The Pure Land method takes in all people, whether they are of low, medium, or high capacity. It is beyond all relativities, in perfect fusion. It is inconceivable: it is perfectly all-encompassing, and goes completely beyond all other Buddhist methods. It is very profound and hard to believe in. *Therefore it is specially announced to those of great wisdom: without the highest level of wisdom, you cannot arrive directly at the stage where you have no doubts about the Pure Land teaching.*[15]

"West" signifies the place where the Pure Land appears. A "Buddha-land" is a whole great galaxy of worlds that are all taught by one Buddha. In terms of our world, there is a central Polar Mountain, and four continents to the east, west, south, and north of it, illuminated by the same sun and moon, surrounded by a circular range of iron mountains: this is one world. A thousand of these make up a small world-system, a thousand small world-systems make up a medium world system, and a thousand medium world-systems make up a great galaxy of worlds. West of a hundred billion of such Buddha-lands is the Land of Ultimate Bliss.

Question: Why is the Land of Ultimate Bliss in the west?

Answer: This is not a good question. If the Land of Ultimate Bliss were in the east, you would be asking why it is in the east. Isn't this just playing with words? What's more, if you look at the Land of Ultimate Bliss from a vantage point beyond the hundred billion Buddha-lands, it is in the east. What is worth creating doubts about?

"There exists a world called Ultimate Bliss." This introduces us to the name of Amitabha's environment, to his domain. In the temporal dimension, its time is reckoned in terms of past, present, and future. In the spatial dimension, its boundaries are reckoned in terms of the Ten Directions (the four cardinal directions, the four intermediate directions, the nadir and the zenith).

The Sanskrit name for the Land of Ultimate Bliss is "Sukhavati". It is also called the Land of Peaceful Nurturing, the Land of Peace and Bliss, the Land of Pure Equanimity and a few other names. The basic meaning is that it is utterly peaceful and secure, and forever removed from all forms of pain and suffering. This is explained at length below.

There are four kinds of Pure Land, and each kind is in turn subdivided in terms of purity or defilement (see glossary, "Four Pure Lands").

Buddhas have three bodies, which are discussed in terms of singularity and multiplicity [see glossary: "Three Bodies of the Buddhas"].

When the sutra says "there exists a world called Ultimate Bliss" and "there exists a Buddha called Amitabha," *it is saying that both that world and that Buddha do actually exist.*[16] There are four meanings here.

1) There is a real Pure Land, and it makes us happy to seek it.

2) It gives us truthful instructions, to make us concentrate on the Pure Land.

3) The Pure Land is not a figment of the imagination or a mirage, that it is not a roundabout

teaching not to be taken literally, that it is not an empty falsity, that it is not a land reached via the Theravada vehicle.[17]

4) The Pure Land is part of our true nature, to enable us to have a profound realization of it and penetrate into the truth of Real Mark (the Mind).

"Buddha expounding the Dharma" on this occasion shows that both the Pure Land and Amitabha exist -- this is not a case of "the past is already gone, and the future has not yet taken shape." We must make a vow to be born in the Pure Land, and to hear Amitabha's teaching personally, so that we may quickly achieve true enlightenment.

The fact that the Pure Land and Amitabha Buddha are here in the present encourages us to have faith. The fact that Amitabha's world is called the Land of Ultimate Bliss encourages us to vow to be born there. The fact that the Buddha in the Pure Land is called Amitabha encourages us to engage in the wondrous practice of invoking his name.

The words of the sutra are concise, but the meaning is very profound.

This concludes my commentary on the introductory portion of the sutra.

[*ADDITIONAL COMMENTARY:* According to the contemporary Vietnamese Master Tô Liên: "If we are discussing *the different manifestations of the universe,* the Pure Land of Amitabha Buddha is indeed ten billion Buddha lands away. However, if we are speaking of *the Pure Land of the Mind,*

then the ten billion Buddha lands are not outside the narrow confines of our own minds. If we recite the Buddha's name singlemindedly, the Pure Land can be found in every recitation -- the Pure Land is here and now."]

[Main portion of sutra]

The main body of the sutra is divided into three parts. The *first* presents a full-scale description of the wonders of the Pure Land and of Amitabha in order to arouse our faith. The *second* makes a special point of urging sentient beings to seek rebirth in the Pure Land, in order to get them to vow to do so. The *third* teaches Pure Land practitioners to recite the Buddha-name in order to establish their practice.

The essential message of the sutra as a whole is to induce people to develop faith and vows and recite the Buddha-name. Vows and faith are acts of wisdom, reciting the Buddha-name is an act of practice. *Whether we achieve rebirth in the Pure Land depends entirely on whether or not we have faith and vows. How high we rank in the Pure Land depends entirely on how deeply we recite the Buddha-name.* Thus, the act of wisdom is the guide, and the act of practice is true cultivation: they go together like eyes and feet.

[Faith in the Pure Land]

The first part of the main body of the sutra has two sections: the first describes the wonders of the Pure Land, and the second describes the wonders of Amitabha.

Now let us look at the first part. Buddha asks Shariputra:

> **Why is this land called Ultimate Bliss?**

Next comes the explanation, in two parts: an explanation of the beneficiaries of the Pure Land, and an explanation of what they receive.

> **It is called "Ultimate Bliss" because the sentient beings in this land are free from the myriad sufferings common to mankind, and only know every kind of joy.**

Sentient beings are the ones who receive the benefits of the Pure Land. All sentient beings can be said to have inherent enlightenment (Buddha Nature). But here we are talking in the language of everyday people, using the lowest to stand for the highest.

In this mundane world of ours, the world called "Saha" (Endurance), suffering and happiness intermingle. We suffer when we suffer pain, because it harries the body and the mind. When we are happy we soon suffer the pain of disintegration, since happiness does not remain for long. When we are neither suffering nor happy, we still suffer the pain of transiency, since all things are transitory by nature.

The Pure Land is forever removed from these three kinds of suffering. The happiness in the Pure Land is not the same as the happiness in our world, which is only relative to suffering, so the former is called ultimate bliss...

Next, Buddha explains what sentient beings experience in Amitabha's Land of Ultimate Bliss:

> **Furthermore, this land is called "Ultimate Bliss" because it is surrounded by seven rings of railings, and seven layers of netting, and seven rows of trees, all made of the four precious jewels.**

The number seven represents the seven categories of the Thirty-seven Limbs of Enlightenment (the four mindfulnesses, the four right efforts, the four bases of miraculous power, the five roots, the five powers, the seven factors of Enlightenment, and the eightfold path). The four precious jewels represent the four qualities of enlightenment: that it is eternal, blissful, personal, and pure.

The word "surrounded" stands for the innumerable abodes of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. The fact that the surroundings are all made of the four precious jewels indicates that the sentient beings in the Pure Land have their own deep merit, and the fact that these precious things surround them stands for the holy ones who are everywhere in this Land of Ultimate Bliss...

[*ADDITIONAL COMMENTARY (after Master Hsuan Hua)*: The railings represent the precepts (prohibiting evil and preventing error), the netting represents concentration (because one does not enter or emerge from true concentration, but is always concentrated) and the trees represent wisdom (if you have wisdom, you are said to be tall).]

Next the sutra gives two broad explanations: first, an explanation of what sentient beings receive in the Pure Land and second, a combined explanation of the recipients and what they receive.

The first explanation is also in two sections: a description of where sentient beings are born in the Pure Land, and a summary of the powers of Amitabha Buddha.

> Moreover, the Land of Ultimate Bliss has ponds of seven jewels filled with the waters of eight virtues. The bottom of each of the ponds is pure golden sand, and the stepped walkways that lead up from all four sides of each of the ponds are made of gold, silver, lapis lazuli and crystal. Above the ponds there are towers which are adorned with silver and gold and lapis lazuli and crystal and mother of pearl, red agate and carnelians. In the ponds there are lotus flowers as big as cartwheels: blue ones shining with blue light, yellow ones shining with yellow light, red ones shining with red light, and white ones shining with white light, each emitting a subtle pure fragrance.[18]

Earlier on the sutra described where sentient beings live in the Pure Land; now it describes where they are born.

The jewel ponds and the things made of gold and silver and so on in the Pure Land are not the same as the earth and stones in our mundane world.

The eight virtues of the water that fills the jewel ponds in the Pure Land are the following: it is pure and clear, unlike the turbid water of our world; it is clear and cool, unlike the water of our world, which is either too cold or too hot; it has a sweet pleasing taste, unlike the water of our world, which has an inferior taste ... it is light and limpid, unlike the heavy water of our world; it is sparkling bright, unlike the murky water of our world; it is peaceful, unlike the turbulent water of our world; it eliminates hunger and thirst, unlike the water of our world which makes us shiver; it always nurtures the capacities of sentient beings, unlike the water of our world ... The water in the Pure Land always keeps the jewel ponds perfectly full, unlike the water in our world, which can dry up or overflow. The bottom of the jewel ponds is pure golden sand, unlike the mud and muck on the bottom of ponds in our world. The walkways ... are made of precious things, unlike the brick and stone walkways in our world.

The pavilions above the ponds are adorned with silver and gold and crystal and mother of pearl and red agate, unlike the pavilions in our world. These pavilions are dwelling places, and they are also places where teaching assemblies are held. As soon as a person is reborn in the Pure Land, and comes forth from one of the lotus-wombs in one of the jewel ponds, that person can enter a teaching assembly, see Amitabha Buddha, and hear the Dharma being preached. The bodies that are born from these lotuses are shining with light, and the lotus-wombs themselves are also shining with light. The colored lights of the Land of Ultimate Bliss are infinitely varied ... The "subtle pure fragrance" of the lotus flowers is emblematic of their special virtues: they are ethereal, unobstructed, formless, and not sense-objects ... [19]

[ADDITIONAL COMMENTARY: According to Pure Land treatises, at the high level of noumenon or principle, this passage is a metaphor for the True Mind. The jewelled ponds represent the Mind's infinite breadth and profundity, the golden sands its purity and qualities of excellence. The towers symbolize the loftiness of the Mind, rising above the realms of gods and men; the lotus reflects a Mind with roots in mundane soil but untouched by mud and defilement. The lotus also stands for Buddhism, rooted in the universal truth of suffering,but transcending it. The cartwheels suggest the Wheel of the Dharma, crushing all afflictions as it carries the faithful away from the Saha World, towards the realm of the sages.]

In the next sentence, the sutra sums up the powers of Amitabha Buddha.

> **The Land of Ultimate Bliss is complete with all these adornments and virtues.**

All the adornments of the dwellings in the Pure Land and the settings in which sentient beings are reborn in the Pure Land are created by the inherently real virtues of the great vows and great deeds of Amitabha Buddha. That's why he can adorn all the Four Pure Lands, and embrace all the ordinary people and saints of all the worlds of the past, present, and future, and enable them to be reborn in the Pure Land.

With his great vows, Amitabha creates the causal basis for sentient beings to multiply their good roots, and with his great deeds he creates the conditions for sentient beings to increase their merits and virtues. Amitabha enables us to develop faith and vows and to recite the Buddha-name, and from moment to moment achieve these virtues. All this is already accomplished: it is not just happening now, nor is it yet to happen. All the adornments of Amitabha act as an augmenting substance that stimulates the development of all the adornments within the minds of sentient beings. Amitabha in *toto* merges with sentient beings: all his powers merge with ours. Thus the sutra says that the Pure Land "is complete with all these adornments and virtues."

[*Additional commentary*: The Pure Land of Amitabha Buddha is adorned with the many virtues of its inhabitants. Because virtues (unlike merits) are unconditioned, the Pure Land thus created is beyond Birth and Death.]

Next the sutra explains the sentient beings in the Pure Land and what they receive. First it explains what they experience in terms of the five sense-faculties and five sense-objects. Next it explains this in terms of hearing and sounds. Again, the first part is divided into the explanation itself and the summary.

> **And there is more -- celestial music is constantly playing in this Buddha-land, and the ground is made of pure gold. Heavenly flowers rain down at all hours**

> **of the day and night. In the morning the sentient beings of this land fill their robes with multitudes of wondrous flowers and make offerings to hundreds of billions of Buddhas in other worlds. When it is meal time, they return to their own land, to eat and circumambulate the teaching assembly.**

Music represents the sense-object *sound*, the ground represents the sense-object *form*, the flowers represent the two sense-objects *form* and *scent*, food represents the sense-object *flavor*, making offerings represents the sense-object *touch*. It is obvious that the sense-faculties of sentient beings in the Pure Land are paired with sense-objects to show that in the Pure Land there is only happiness.

The music is constantly playing, twenty-four hours a day. The ground is made of pure gold, because Amitabha's Pure Land is a world adorned with precious things, whose basic substance is gold.

The sutra says that flowers rain down at all hours of the day and night. But since both the Pure Land and its inhabitants shine with light, and do not depend on sun and moon for illumination, how can there be a division of day and night? This is just said provisionally to accord with the distinctions we make in our mundane world.

The Sanskrit name for the flowers that rain down in the Pure Land (mandarava) means both "as we wish" and "white flowers".

Making offerings to Buddhas in other worlds symbolizes that through having a true causal basis, we can attain the ultimate fruit (Buddhahood), and that the virtues of this ultimate attainment extend everywhere. Using the language of our mundane world, the sutra speaks of hundreds of billions of Buddhas. The idea is that after we are reborn in the Land of Ultimate Bliss, we can make offerings to Sakyamuni Buddha and Maitreya Buddha and if we are strengthened by the supernatural power of Amitabha, there is no place too far for us to reach.

The time for eating is the morning, so the sutra says the inhabitants of the Pure Land return to their own land when it is time to eat to show their supernatural power of travel. They go to all the worlds in the Ten Directions without leaving their own land.

This passage shows that in the Pure Land every sound, every sense-object, every moment, and even every step and every snap of the fingers, interpenetrates without obstruction, and are in accord with the three Jewels [Buddha, Dharma and Sangha] of all the worlds of the Ten Directions. It also shows that in our mundane world, the defilements and obstructions are so serious that our world is separated from the Land of Ultimate Bliss, even though it is not really separated from it. *When we are reborn in the Land of Ultimate Bliss, our virtues will be so great that we will be separated from this mundane world called "Endurance", without really being separated from it ...*

The sutra sums things up:

The Land of Ultimate Bliss is complete with all these adornments and virtues.

Next the sutra explains what is experienced in the Pure Land in terms of hearing sound. In fact, the Land of Ultimate Bliss encompasses the potential of the Dharmadhatu, (cosmos). All *the sense-objects are perfect and wondrous there, and produce all the teachings.*

This passage in the ṣutra is also divided into two parts: a particular explanation, and a general summation. The particular explanation discusses the sounds that transform sentient beings, and the sounds that transform inanimate things. It tells of the sounds of the birds bringing the benefits of the Dharma, and then briefly answers a question.

Here is the first part:

> And there is more still - in this land there are birds of all sorts of wondrous variegated colors: white cranes, peacocks, orioles, egrets, kalavinkas and jivanjivas.[20] All these birds bring forth harmonious songs day and night. Their songs communicate such Buddhist teachings as the Five Roots, the Five Powers, the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, the Eightfold Path, as well as other teachings.[21]
>
> When sentient beings in this land hear the singing of the birds, they become mindful of the Buddhas, mindful of the

Dharma, and mindful of the Sangha [Community of monks and nuns].

Although all Buddhist methods are subsumed under the Thirty-Seven Limbs of Enlightenment, the potentials and circumstances of sentient beings all differ, and *so different forms of the Buddhist teaching have been devised,* some open, some closed, using all sorts of terminology. The Teaching is expressed effectively to all sentient beings according to what they are ready to hear.

This enables those who hear the Teaching to become mindful of the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. It enables them to develop the Bodhi Mind (aspiration for enlightenment for the benefit of self and others), and to put an end to afflictions. They vividly see the inconceivable mercy and awe-inspiring character of the Buddha, so they become mindful of the enlightened ones. The joy of the Dharma enters their hearts and they are filled with the flavor of the Dharma, so they become mindful of the teaching of enlightenment. They listen to the teaching together, and accept it as a community, and wholeheartedly cultivate realization, so they become mindful of the community of seekers. (See glossary, "Mindfulness of the Buddhas".)

The three forms of contemplation (on emptiness, on relative reality, and on the mean) and the three objects of contemplation (the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha) have different aspects but the same essence.

You should use the foregoing brief analysis of the difference among the Thirty-Seven Limbs of Enlightenment to understand the four levels of the

Buddhist Teaching (elementary, common, special, and complete) and the three levels of truth (absolute, relative, and the mean).

In the next passage the sutra briefly answers a question:

> **Do not think that these birds were born as birds due to karmic retribution for past misdeeds. Why not? In this Buddha-land, the Three Evil Planes of existence (as animals, hungry ghosts, and hell-beings) do not exist. In this Buddha-land even the names of the Evil Planes of Existence do not exist, much less the realities. All these birds are the creations of Amitabha Buddha, fashioned in order to sings the sounds of the Dharma.**

It is obvious that the sutra is answering possible objections that might be raised.

Question: Are birds (as animals) not creatures belonging to one of the Evil Planes of existence?

Answer: The birds in the Pure Land are not birds as a result of karmic retribution for having committed evil. They are called birds, but they are all communicating the ultimate merits of the Tathagatas. They can be called "birds of the ultimate", and this is a beautiful appellation conveying their innate virtues, not some pejorative name [connoting creatures born in a low plane of existence].

Question: What does it mean that these birds are fashioned by Amitabha?

Answer: There are four reasons for this.

First, ordinary people take delight in these birds and can be taught by them, since this suits their feelings, and makes them happy. Second, when the birds express the Dharma, they enable their listeners to become virtuous. Third, by making us realize that we should not think of these birds in a pejorative way, it counteracts our tendency to make arbitrary distinctions. Fourth, the birds are emanations of Amitabha, which lets us awaken to the everywhere-equal nature of the Dharma Body, which is inherent in everything and creates everything.

This passage shows us that all the sounds in the Pure Land, such as the sound of the breeze and the rustling of trees, as well as everything about the Pure Land environment and the Buddha who presides there, whether a provisional expedient or an absolute reality -- all these things are in their very essence identical to Amitabha Buddha with his Dharma Body, Reward Body, and Emanation Body. All these things are no different from Amitabha Buddha, who is eternal, blissful, personal, and pure.

> In this Buddha-land, there is a slight breeze that stirs the rows of jewel trees and jewel netting, so that they emit subtle wondrous sounds, like hundreds and thousands of melodies playing all at once. All those who hear these sounds spontaneously become mindful of the

> **Buddha, mindful of the Dharma, and mindful of the Sangha.**

In the Pure Land, both sentient beings and inanimate things manifest the wondrous Dharma together, and simultaneously expound the innumerable methods of the *elementary*, *common*, *special* and *complete* teachings. They offer explanations to all beings according to their kind, enabling their audiences to become mindful of the Three Jewels -- Buddha (the Enlightened One), Dharma (the Teaching of Enlightenment), and Sangha (the Community of Seekers).

By becoming mindful of the Three Jewels, sentient beings receive four benefits. When ordinary people first hear the teaching, their bodies experience delight: this is the benefit of joy. When their vital energy makes contact with the Three Jewels, they are sure to be able to develop the Bodhi Mind: this is the benefit of becoming virtuous. Using this virtue to conquer afflictions is the benefit of destroying evil. Awakening to the Three Jewels [Buddha, Dharma, Sangha] as one single essence is the benefit of understanding the Supreme Truth.

At this point the sutra sums up the foregoing presentation with the line:

> **This Buddha-land is complete with all these adornments and virtues.**

The sutra sums things up again and again so that we can believe with profound faith that all the adornments of the Pure Land are brought into being by the vows and actions of our guide Amitabha, and manifested by his wisdom, and that they are also brought about by our own pure karma, as manifestations of consciousness. The Buddha-mind and the minds of sentient beings are reflections of each other, just as the lights of many lamps both individually reach everywhere and seem to merge into one. Inner truth as a whole forms phenomena, and phenomena as a whole are merged with inner truth. Our entire True Nature gives rise to genuine religious practice, and genuine religious practice in its entirety lies within our True Nature. This is something we should constantly ponder deeply.

How can anyone talk as if there is another "Pure Land that is Mind Alone" apart from this Pure Land? If you do this you are indulging in empty babbling.

This is the end of the section in the sutra describing the wonders of the Pure Land.

[Description of the wonders of Amitabha]

Next the sutra takes up the wonders of Amitabha Buddha himself. First Buddha poses a question, and then proceeds to explain Amitabha's name:

> **What do you think: why is this Buddha called Amitabha?**

This sutra teaches the wondrous practice of reciting the name of Amitabha, so it makes a special point of explaining the name. The intent of the sutra is that people should develop deep faith in the inconceivable powers of this great name and its myriad virtues, and singlemindedly recite the Buddha-name without any further doubts or diversions.

The next passage gives two explanations of the name "Amitabha" -- as "infinite light" and as "infinite life". The literal translation of "Amitabha" is "infinite", and infinity is actually unexplainable. Here in the sutra, our teacher Sakyamuni Buddha uses the meanings "infinite light" and "infinite life" to encompass all sorts of infinity.

Infinite light extends through space in all directions; infinite life extends through time and reaches through past, present, and future. The dimensions of space and time interpenetrating are the body of the universe. This body as a whole is the body and land of Amitabha, and this body as a whole is the name of Amitabha.

Thus, Amitabha *is* the inherently enlightened True Nature of sentient beings, and reciting the name of Amitabha reveals this enlightenment. Inherent enlightenment and the enlightenment as it is revealed through cultivation and realization are fundamentally not two different things, just as sentient beings and Buddhas are not two different things. Thus, if we are in accord with our inherently enlightened true nature for a moment, we are Buddhas for a moment, and if we are in accord with our inherently enlightened true nature moment after moment, we are Buddhas moment after moment.

First, the sutra gives the definition of the name of Amitabha as "Infinite Light":

> **The light of this Buddha is infinite, and shines on all lands throughout the universe without obstruction. Thus this Buddha is called Amitabha.**

The true nature of mind is still but always shining with awareness; hence it is a light. The idea here is that Amitabha Buddha penetrates to the infinite essence of the true nature of mind, so his light is infinite. All the Buddhas penetrate to the true nature of mind, and they all shine through all the worlds in the Ten Directions, so they all could be called "Infinite Light".

But the Buddhas in the causal stages (i.e., as Boddhisattvas) differ in the power of their vows, and they are named differently according to their circumstances. When Amitabha (in a previous incarnation in the distant past) was the monk Dharmakara, he made forty-eight vows, among them the vow that his light would forever shine through all the worlds in the Ten Directions. Now that he has achieved Buddhahood, what he vowed has been accomplished.

The light of the Dharmakaya is boundless, and the light of the Sambhogakaya is in accord with True Nature -- in this the paths of all the Buddhas are the same. The light of the Nirmanakaya (Emanation Body such as Sakyamuni) differs in scope: in some Buddhas it shines for a hundred miles, in other Buddhas it shines a million times further; in some Buddhas it illuminates one world, in others it illuminates a million worlds. Only Amitabha's light shines universally. Thus Amitabha in particular is named "Infinite Light".

Still, the three Buddha-bodies are neither one nor different. *These distinctions are made only to benefit sentient beings.* We must understand that there are no obstructions among the three Buddha-bodies. From the point of view of ordinary people, if their affinity with the Buddhas is deep, then the light of the Buddhas will reach them everywhere, and always appear to them in its complete fullness in all worlds.

Next the sutra gives the definition of the name Amitabha as "Infinite Life":

> **Also, the life-span of this Buddha and his people is an infinite number of immeasurable eons, and so he is called Amitabha.**

The true nature of Mind is shining with awareness yet ever still: hence it is life. The idea here is that Amitabha Buddha penetrates to the infinite essence of the true nature of Mind, so his life span is infinite.

When Amitabha was Dharmakara, the king of vows, he made a vow that the life spans of both Buddhas and humans in his realm would be infinite. Now what he vowed has been accomplished in the Pure Land, and he is given the special name "Infinite Life".

We must understand that the names "Infinite Light" and "Infinite Life" are both based on the equivalent potential inherent in sentient beings. Because sentient beings and Buddhas are inherently equal, those who invoke the name of Amitabha will be no different from him either in their light or in their life span.

Moreover, given the truth of infinite light, when sentient beings are born in Amitabha's Land of Ultimate Bliss, they are also born in all the lands of the Ten Directions, and when they see Amitabha Buddha, they are also seeing all the Buddhas of the Ten Directions. Thus they are saved themselves and they can bring benefits to all.

Given the truth of infinite life, the people in the Land of Ultimate Bliss are in the position that they are certain of attaining complete enlightenment in a single lifetime and will not be reborn in different forms.

We must realize that there is no name of Amitabha apart from the mind of infinite light and infinite life that is before us now at this moment, and there is no way for us to penetrate the mind of infinite light and infinite life that is before us now at this moment apart from the name of Amitabha. I hope you will ponder this deeply!

Now comes the section of the sutra that describes Amitabha and his assembly:

> **Amitabha Buddha attained enlightenment ten eons ago.**

The life span of Amitabha Buddha is infinite, and here when the sutra just speaks of ten eons, this is just a provisional way of teaching. In fact Amitabha's time has been endless, and he has urged, is urging, and will urge all the sentient beings of the past, present, and future to quickly seek birth in the Pure Land, share in the infinite life of the Buddhas, *and accomplish this all in one lifetime.*

The sutra goes on to speak of Amitabha's innumerable disciples who are Arhats, Bodhisattvas, and one-life Bodhisattvas. All of them achieved their status during the past ten eons. Here the sutra is really illustrating the fact that throughout all the worlds of the Ten Directions in the past, present, and future, many sentient beings achieve birth in the Pure Land with no falling back, and do so easily.

> **Moreover, this Buddha has innumerable disciples, all of whom are Arhats, whose numbers are incalculable. Amitabha also has a following of innumerable Bodhisattvas.**

Sentient beings in other worlds who are set in their ways as followers of the Lesser Vehicles do not get to be born in Amitabha's Pure Land. But if those who have studied the practices of the Lesser Vehicles in their early lives develop the Bodhi Mind and turn toward enlightenment when they are facing death, and make great vows, they too will be reborn in the Pure Land.

Again, the sutra sums things up:

The Land of Ultimate Bliss is complete with all these adornments and virtues.

Amitabha Buddha himself, his disciples, and the Bodhisattvas who follow him, are all within the causal ground of Amitabha, created by his vows and his actions. This is also the case at the level of results; when one [dharma] is formed, all [dharma] are formed. Thus Amitabha Buddha himself, his disciples, and the Bodhisattvas who follow him, are neither identical to nor different from each other: self and others are not two. Thus, after describing Amitabha Buddha himself, his disciples and the Bodhisattvas who follow him, the sutra says, "The Land of Ultimate Bliss is complete with all these adornments and virtues." Amitabha can enable those who have faith and vows and recite his name to become complete with all these virtues too, from moment to moment.

This is the end of the first part of the sutra, which gives a broad account of the wondrous fruits of the Pure Land environment and Amitabha and his assembly, in order to arouse our faith.

[Vowing to achieve rebirth in Pure Land]

In the next section of the sutra, Buddha urges all sentient beings to seek rebirth in the Pure Land and to make vows.

This section is in two parts. The first reveals the supreme causal basis for rebirth in the Pure Land and the second extols the special excellence of the Pure Land.

What is the special excellence of the Pure Land? *Sentient beings can be reborn there carrying their karmic load with them, and thereby transcend the triple world "horizontally."* Amitabha's Pure Land is a pure land where saints and ordinary beings dwell together, but it includes all Four Lands (the Land where Saints and Ordinary Beings Dwell Together, the Land of Expedient Liberation, the Land of Real Reward, and the Land of Eternally Quiescent Light), and reveals the Four Teachings (elementary, common, special, and complete).

Sentient beings who are born in Amitabha's Pure Land purify the Four Lands completely, see the three Buddha-bodies perfectly, and fully arrive at the point where they cannot fall back from their position, from their practice, or their mindfulness. *All the people in Amitabha's Pure Land will attain enlightenment in one lifetime.*

All these special features of the Pure Land are pointed out in the next two sections of the sutra. You should study them carefully.

Now the first passage:

> **None of the sentient beings who are born in the Land of Ultimate Bliss ever fall back into a lower realm [i.e., they are avaivartika]. Many among them have**

> **only one more lifetime to go before Buddhahood. Their number is incalculable: they can be spoken of as innumerable.**

The sutra uses a Sanskrit word, "avaivartika", which means "not falling back" (non-retrogression). There are three senses of this "not falling back" that apply to sentient beings in the Pure Land. *First, they do not fall back from their position*: having entered the holy stream (four levels of sagehood culminating in Arhatship), they do not fall back to the level of gods and men. *Second, they do not fall back from their practice*: as followers of the Bodhisattva path they continue to work for the salvation of all beings, and do not fall back to the level of the Lesser Vehicles with their concern limited to individual salvation. *Third, they do not fall back from their mindfulness*: from mind-moment to mind-moment, they flow into the ocean of all-knowledge.

In Amitabha's Pure Land, the ten forms of mindfulness are fully developed, and even those who dwell on its lowest level, and have been born in there bringing along their karmic burdens, do not fall back from their position, from their practice, or from their mindfulness.

According to the doctrines of the non-Pure Land Buddhist scriptures, it is a deviation from the established terminology to speak of skipping stages. It is only in

Amitabha's Pure Land of Common Residence, where saints and ordinary beings dwell together, that people are not in any of these stages, and yet in all of them. Such transcendence of names and forms does not exist in any other Buddha-land; this definition of stages and levels, this teaching, does not exist in any other Buddha-land. But how could any of this exist if not for the ultimate reality of the true nature of mind, if not for the special effect of reciting the Buddha-name, if not for the great vows of Amitabha?

In the non-Pure Land Buddhist scriptures, the stage of having only one lifetime to go before enlightenment is generally attributed only to Bodhisattvas. But everyone in the Land of Ultimate Bliss will achieve enlightenment in one lifetime and among them are countless numbers of superlative Bodhisattvas.

Among the teachings given by Sakyamuni Buddha, only the *Avatamsaka Sutra* explains perfect realization of Buddhahood in a single lifetime. The basis for perfect realization is explained in the Chapter on the "Vows of Samantabhadra", which shows the way back to the land called "Peaceful Nurturing" (another name for Amitabha's Pure Land). The *Avatamsaka Sutra* thus *urges the whole assembly in the Flower Store World (cosmos) on toward the Pure Land.*

How amazing! Ordinary people in the Pure Land reach the stage of having only one lifetime to go before enlightenment, just like the great Bodhisattvas. What a sublime teaching -- it is truly unfathomable! What was given to us in the *Flower Ornament (Avatamsaka) Sutra* is here in the *Amitabha Sutra*. Yet from ancient times until now, few have believed in it, and many have doubted it. Complex writings have been produced, but the truth has been sacrificed. All I can do to set things right is give my heart's blood.

At this point in the sutra, Buddha gives a specific admonition:

> **When sentient beings hear these teachings, they must take a vow to be born in this land. Why so? So that they can be together with all these Beings of Superior Goodness.**

The Arhats and the Bodhisattvas the sutra talks about at the beginning as part of the assembly listening to Buddha expound the sutra can be called "good people". But only those who are at the top level of the causal ground for enlightenment, are called "Beings of Superior Goodness" (Beings of the Highest Virtue). The sutra says "all these Beings of Superior Goodness" because their number is large.

"Being together" expresses the idea that in the Pure Land the ordinary and the holy live together. There are sages of real attainment, who still carry some past impure karma, and sages adept in provisional expedients, with their vows of great compassion, so ordinary people in the

Pure Land get to live together with holy sages. There are real saints whose desires have been extinguished, and teachers with skill-in-means whose entanglements have been ended. They differ widely in levels of attainment, and of bliss, but for the time being they are together in the Pure Land.

In our mundane world, on the other hand, those who see and hear such holy sages are few, and among those who do have the good fortune to see or hear them, few have the opportunity to approach them.

When a Buddha is in the world, there may be relatively many holy ones [helping to spread the teaching], but after all they are still rare jewels, and they cannot cover the whole world like the stars of the firmament.

But even though Amitabha's Pure Land is a place where saints and ordinary beings dwell together, their actions and their achievements are different.

Those who have been born in the Pure Land are together due to their transcendental karma and inconceivable deeds. These beings act as one another's teachers, and work in harmony, so that they may end ignorance and delusion and together achieve wondrous enlightenment.

Therefore, the ordinary sentient beings born in the Pure Land, by virtue of not falling back, have in fact transcended many levels of Bodhisattvahood. If we say they are ordinary people, this is wrong, because they are beyond the cycle of rebirth; they are on the verge of enlightenment, and are no different from the great

Bodhisattvas Avalokiteshvara and Mahasthamaprapta. Although they are going to attain Enlightenment in their current lifetime, still, they must be called ordinary people, and they cannot be called One-Life Bodhisattvas. This state of affairs cannot be encompassed by the systems of the non-Pure Land sutras, and has no precedent in Buddha-lands other than Amitabha's Pure Land.

Therefore, we must realize that the most urgent task for sentient beings is to cross over to the Common Residence Pure Land Where Saints and Ordinary Beings Dwell Together. The Land of Ultimate Bliss, Amitabha's Pure Land, is unique -- it surpasses all the other pure lands.

Only when we comprehend this can we have deep faith in the power of the vows of Amitabha. Only when we believe in the power of Amitabha Buddha can we have deep faith in the virtues of his name. Only when we have deep faith in the recitation of the name of Amitabha can we have deep faith in the True Nature of sentient beings, which has always been inconceivable. Only when we have this deep faith can we make great vows.

The text of the sutra says sentient beings must take a vow to be born in the Pure Land. This word "must" points to deep faith. Making vows with deep faith is precisely the Mind of Supreme Enlightenment.

In sum, *faith and vows are truly the guiding compass leading to the Pure Land. Relying on faith and vows and consistently invoking the Buddha-name is correct practice.*

If your faith and vows are solid and strong, then even if you recite the Buddha-name only ten times, or only once, as you are on the brink of death, you are sure to attain birth in the Pure Land. Without faith and vows, even if you recite the Buddha-name until you achieve a level of concentration the Zen literature describes as "wind cannot enter you and rain cannot wet you" and "you stand like a silver wall or an iron wall", you will still not have a way to be born in the Pure Land.

Those who cultivate Pure Land practices must realize this truth. The *Longer Amitabha Sutra* also takes "vows" as essential and is identical in meaning to this section.

[Practice]

Now the sutra directly teaches practitioners that reciting the Buddha-name is the way to practice. First it shows the working of cause and effect in creating the bodies of the Buddha, and then it reiterates its admonition to recite the Buddha-name.

> **One cannot be born in this land through minor good roots, blessings, virtues and causal connections. If there are good men or good women who hear of Amitabha Buddha, and recite his name *singlemindedly and without confusion*, for one day or two days or three days or four days or five days or six days or seven days, then when these people are about**

> **to die, Amitabha Buddha and his whole assembly will appear before them. When they die, their minds being *unified and not chaotic*, they will attain rebirth in Amitabha's Land of Ultimate Bliss.[22]**

Good roots stem from the Bodhi Mind, the direct cause. Other meritorious actions that promote the path, such as charity, discipline, and meditation, bring merits and virtues.[23] They are the conditions that help the Bodhi Mind to develop.

Literalist disciples of the Lesser Vehicle (Shravakas and Pratyeka Buddhas), have few good roots. The meritorious deeds and virtues of human beings and gods, defiled as they are, are also few. These will not enable you to be born in the Pure Land. *Only if you have faith and vows and recite the Buddha-name will each and every repetition of the Buddha-name be amply supplied with good roots, merits and virtues.* Even if you invoke the Buddha-name in a scattered state of mind, the merits and good roots are still incalculable -- how much the more so when you invoke the Buddha name singlemindedly.

By invoking the Buddha-name, you will bring on a response -- the impression is made and the seal is lifted -- Amitabha and his holy retinue come to you without coming, and extend a hand to lead you off. You, the person practicing Buddha-name recitation, recognize Amitabha in your mind, and you go to the Pure Land without going, placing yourself in a jewel lotus there.

When the sutra speaks of "good men and good women", it does not matter whether you are monks and nuns or householders, whether you are high-ranking or low-ranking, old or young. No matter what your station in life, even if you belong to the Six Planes of Existence and are subject to the Four Modes of Birth, the fact that you are now able to hear the Buddha-name means that the good roots you have accumulated over many eons have ripened and you deserve the appellation "good". This is so even if you have committed the Five Deadly Sins and the Ten Evil Deeds.

"Amitabha Buddha" is the all-inclusive term for the myriad virtues. When you use the name of Amitabha to summon virtue, all the virtues are engendered. *Thus, reciting the name of Amitabha is the correct practice, and you do not need to get involved with other practices such as visualization or meditation. Reciting the name of Amitabha is the simplest and most direct method.*

If you hear the Buddha-name and believe in it, if you believe in it and make vows, then you are fit to recite the Buddha-name. If you do not have faith and do not make vows, it is as if you never heard [the Buddha-name] at all. Merely hearing the name of Amitabha without faith and vows may become a long-term causal basis for your enlightenment , but it cannot be called the "wisdom that comes from hearing".

Reciting the Buddha-name is a matter of being mindful of the Buddha-name from moment to moment -- thus it is the "wisdom that comes from reflecting on what you heard".

There are two levels of practice in reciting the Buddha-name: reciting the Buddha-name at the phenomenal level and reciting the Buddha-name at the level of inner truth (noumenon).

1. Reciting the Buddha-name at the phenomenal level means believing that Amitabha exists in his Pure Land in the West, but not yet comprehending that he is a Buddha created by the Mind, and that this Mind is Buddha. It means you resolve to make vows and to seek birth in the Pure Land, like a child longing for its mother and never forgetting her for a moment.

2. *Reciting the Buddha-name at the level of inner truth* (noumenon) means believing that Amitabha and his Pure Land in the West are inherent features of our own [pure] Minds, the creation of our own [pure] Minds. It means using the great name of Amitabha, which is inherent in our Minds and the creation of our Minds, as a focal point to concentrate on, so that we never forget it for a moment.

The sutra speaks of reciting the Buddha-name for one to seven days, defining a period of time in which we should achieve singlemindedness. This passage can be interpreted in two ways.

One interpretation is that those with sharp faculties will be able to reach singleminded Buddha-remembrance after one day of invoking the Buddha-name. Those with dull faculties will only be able to reach complete undisturbed Buddha-remembrance after seven days of invoking the Buddha-name. Those of middling faculties may take from two to six days to reach singleminded Buddha-remembrance.

Another interpretation of this passage is that those with sharp faculties will be able to maintain singleminded

Buddha-remembrance for seven days, those will dull faculties will only be able to maintain it for a single day, and those of middling faculties may maintain it for from two to six days.

There are also two categories of singleminded practice (Undisturbed One Mind).

i) Regardless of whether you recite the Buddha-name at the phenomenal level or the inner truth level, if you invoke the name of Amitabha until you subdue all afflictions (anger, greed, ignorance...) and put an end to Delusions of Views and Thoughts, this is the One Mind at the phenomenal level.

ii) Regardless of whether you recite the Buddha-name at the phenomenal level or the inner truth level, if you invoke the name of Amitabha until your mind opens and you see inherent Buddhahood, this is the One Mind at the level of inner truth.

The One Mind at the phenomenal level is not tainted by Delusions of Views and Thoughts, and the One Mind at the inner truth level is not deluded by the supposed dualisms of essence and form, nirvana and samsara, Buddhas and sentient beings. This is "the wisdom that comes from cultivation".

When you are not subject to Delusions of Views and Thoughts at the moment of your death, the response you get is that Amitabha Buddha will appear before you in his Emanation Body, along with his whole retinue of holy ones. Your mind will no longer create the delusions of desire, form, and formlessness characteristic of this mundane world "Endurance", and you will go to be reborn in either the Pure Land Where Saints and Ordinary Beings Dwell Together, or the Pure Land of Expedient Liberation, in Amitabha's Pure Land.

When you are no longer deluded by dualisms at the moment of your death, the response you get is that Amitabha Buddha will appear before you in his Reward Body, along with his whole retinue of holy ones. Your mind will no longer create the delusions of Samsara and Nirvana, and you will go to be reborn in either the Pure Land of Real Reward, or the Pure Land of Eternally Quiescent Light, in Amitabha's Pure Land.

We must then realize that reciting the name of Amitabha is not only a method that is simple and direct, it is also a method for Sudden Complete Enlightenment. Since, in reciting the Buddha-name, you merge with Buddha from moment to moment, without bothering with visualization or meditation, you immediately witness perfect illumination, with no excess and no lack. *Those of the highest faculties cannot go beyond this level, while those of the lowest capabilities are also able to reach it.* Of course the way Amitabha appears to people and the level of the Pure Land they are born in is not the same for those of different capacities.

We can say that the method of reciting the name of Amitabha fully encompasses all the varieties of Buddhism, the "eight teachings and five periods" (i.e., all the teachings of the Buddha's during his lifetime, according to the T'ien-t'ai schema). *In so doing, it is the most complete expression of the Buddha's compassionate heart, teaching spontaneously without being asked.* What incredible power!

**Question*: The *Meditation Sutra* is devoted to explaining visualization. Why do you say not to bother with visualization?

Answer: This idea comes from the *Meditation Sutra* itself. Because the superior forms of visualization focusing on the Sambhogakaya of Amitabha are beyond the mental power of ordinary people, that sutra in the thirteenth contemplation also introduces a lower grade of visualizing the form of Amitabha focusing on the Nirmanakaya, that is, the physical form, of Amitabha. However those whose karmic barriers are heavy cannot even focus on Amitabha in that way, so in the sixteenth contemplation, the sutra teaches the method of invoking the name of Amitabha. The *Amitabha Sutra* concentrates on the Buddha-name-recitation method of the sixteenth contemplation because it is the Dharma-Ending Age, and there are many people with heavy karmic obstructions...

**Question*: Masters like T'ien-ch'i and Tu-feng have proposed meditating on the Zen question, "Who is the one reciting the Buddha-name?" Why do you say that it is not necessary to practice Zen meditation?

Answer: This idea comes from Master T'ien-ch'i himself as well as other masters. Master T'ien-ch'i did not want to stand idly by while people reciting the Buddha-name failed to comprehend the compassion of Sakyamuni in teaching Buddha-name-recitation, so he posed this question to help them wake up to the real sense of reciting the Buddha-name, which is that our True Mind, not our deluded errant mind should do the recitation (i.e., recitation should be singleminded with no deluded errant thoughts). When he taught this it was like the dawn returning after a long night.

If we are unwilling to still our minds by following Master T'ien-ch'i's advice to contemplate "Who is the one reciting the Buddha-name?" in order to recite the Buddha-name with complete concentration, we are taking hold of "a fragment of tile with which to knock on a door to hit out at our own grandparents [our Mind]"; we are rebelling against our own patriarchal teachers and doing evil, rather than obeying them and being good.

**Question*: Those who are willing to still their minds by reciting the Buddha-name will be all right, but how can those who are unwilling to still their minds achieve accord with the Buddha's Mind?

Answer: Alas! The reason that Master T'ien-ch'i is asking you to still your minds by reciting the Buddha-name and reach accord with the Buddha's Mind is precisely because you are not yet willing to do so. Since you have not yet developed true faith, it is as though you are wearing thick leather blinders, and cannot see through them. You must realize that those with eyes have no reason to light a lamp when the sun is shining -- why should those without eyes struggle to find a lamp in broad daylight?

The Bodhisattva Mahasthamaprapta (a Pure Land sage) has given us a saying that is like a great mass of fire lighting the Buddha Remembrance Samadhi: "Without using any other expedients than Buddha recitation, you are able to open your own mind." Who dares to touch this saying? How can you not be burned by it?

**Question*: When Amitabha Buddha appears to Pure Land practitioners who are on the brink of death, how can they be sure it is not a demon?

Answer: If a Zen follower is not meditating on the Buddha, and yet Buddha suddenly appears unexpectedly, this is called a demon (delusion). A Pure Land practitioner sees the Buddha while focussing on the Buddha. Thus in his case, cause and effect coincide and his mind is in unison with that of the Buddhas. The appearance of the Buddha is therefore not a demon. There is no need to worry about this.

**Question*: When the sutra speaks of reciting the Buddha-name singlemindedly for seven days, does this refer to ordinary times, or to the time when we are about to die?

Answer: This refers to ordinary times.

**Question*: If we recite the Buddha-name for seven days, singlemindedly and without confusion, but later we again become confused and create bad karma, will we still achieve birth in the Pure Land?

Answer: A person who has actually managed to recite the Buddha-name singlemindedly will not become confused or create bad karma again.

**Question*: The *Longer Amitabha Sutra* speaks of attaining birth in the Pure Land through ten repetitions of the Buddha-name. The *Treatise of the Precious King of Samadhi* speaks of attaining birth in the Pure Land through a single repetition of the Buddha-name. Are they referring to ordinary times, or to the time when we are about to die?

Answer: Attaining birth in the Pure Land through ten repetitions of the Buddha-name applies to *both times.* If we recite the Buddha-name ten times each morning, this is an *ordinary occasion*. On the other hand, the *Longer Amitabha Sutra* speaks of attaining birth in the Pure Land through ten repetitions (and this is the same as what the *Meditation Sutra* says) -- this refers to when we are on the *brink of death*. As to the passage in the *Treatise of the Precious King of Samadhi* about attaining birth in the Pure Land through a single repetition of the Buddha-name, this refers to the *time when we are facing death*.

**Question*: If we can attain birth in the Pure Land through ten repetitions of the Buddha name, or even a single repetition, why do we need seven days of reciting the Buddha-name, as the *Amitabha Sutra* says?

Answer: If we have not done the work of reciting the Buddha-name singlemindedly for seven days during ordinary times, how can we manage to recite ten times or even once when we are on the brink of death?

It would be one chance in a million if someone who had committed many evils were to have a causal basis from past lives ripen as he was on the brink of death, enabling him to meet a spiritual friend, hear his teaching, and develop faith and vows. How could he be so lucky? Master T'ien Ju's book *Doubts and Questions about the Pure Land* has refuted this idea of waiting till death to practice Buddha recitation in great detail.[24] People these days should read that book.

**Question*: If Amitabha's Pure Land is a hundred billion worlds away from here, how can we be reborn there instantly?

Answer: A hundred billion worlds are not beyond one moment of thought, since fundamentally there is nothing outside the True Mind. When we rely on the power of Buddha that is inherent in our own mind, what is so hard about being born in the Pure Land instantly?

It is like a many layered scene of mountains and rivers and towers reflected in a mirror: all the layers appear there in the mirror, and in reality there is no near and far. All are reflected at once, appearing without before or after. When the sutra says "West of here, past a hundred billion Buddha-lands, there exists a world called 'Ultimate Bliss'", it is also like this. When the sutra says "In this land there exists a Buddha called Amitabha, who is expounding the Dharma right now", it is also like this.

It is also like this when a person who has developed faith and vows and recited the Buddha-name is about to die, and Amitabha and all his assembly of saints appear before that person. It is also like this when the person dies without his or her mind falling into delusion, and the person is immediately born in Amitabha's Land of Ultimate Bliss.

We must recognize that every word in the sutra is reflected in the Great-Perfect-Wisdom-Mirror of the Ocean-Seal Samadhi.[25]

**Question*: Reciting the Buddha-name is a partial practice, an auxiliary practice. Why do you call it a principal practice?

Answer: Basing ourselves on the One Mind, we speak of faith, vows, and practice. There is however no order of precedence here, nor is naming three aspects a set definition. Without vows and practice, we cannot speak of true faith. Without practice and faith, we cannot speak of true vows. Without faith and vows, we cannot speak of true practice.

Relying fully on our faith and our vows, we recite the Buddha-name. Thus faith, vows, and practice seem to be three things, but all three are fully present in every repetition of the Buddha-name. This is why reciting the Buddha-name is called the cause and condition for numerous good roots, merits and virtues. The *Meditation Sutra* means this when it says that by invoking the Buddha-name, from moment to moment we are clearing away the bad karma of eighty million eons of birth and death. Without great merits, virtues and good roots, how could we clear away bad karma on such a grand scale?

**Question*: With the intensity that comes from reciting the Buddha-name on the brink of death, we can clear away a lot of bad karma. Can we achieve the same result in ordinary times if we invoke the Buddha-name singlemindedly?

Answer: When the sun comes out, all darkness disappears. When we invoke the great name of Amitabha, myriad evil deeds are wiped away.

**Question*: Can we also clear away bad karma if we invoke the Buddha-name with a scattered mind?

Answer: The merit and virtue of the Buddha-name are inconceivable, so how could they not clear away bad karma? But reciting the Buddha-name with a scattered mind does not guarantee being reborn in the Pure Land, since the good roots created by a diffuse, scattered recitation are no match for the evils that have accumulated from time without beginning.

We must understand that all of space could not contain our accumulated evils, if they took on physical form. Every repetition of the Buddha-name might wipe away the bad karma of eighty millions eons of birth and death, but even if we recited the Buddha-name day and night for a hundred years, the amount of bad karma which would be wiped out is like the amount of dirt under a fingernail, while the amount of bad karma remaining is like all the dirt on earth.

The only way to eliminate all bad karma is to recite the Buddha-name to the point of singleminded concentration. This is like a powerful warrior breaking out of an encirclement, so even three armies cannot hem him in any more. In all instances however, invoking the Buddha-name is a seed for becoming enlightened. It is like an indestructible diamond.

When Sakyamuni Buddha was in the world, there was an old man who asked to become a monk. The congregation of five hundred monks all said the old man was lacking in good roots. Buddha however said: "Countless ages ago this man was being pursued by a tiger, and cried out 'Nam Mo Amitabha Buddha!' Now the good roots from that occasion have become ripe: he has met me and found the path. This is not something that followers of the Lesser Vehicle can perceive." This story, together with the teachings of the *Lotus Sutra,* show that even those who invoke the Buddha-name in a scattered, confused state of mind have planted the seed of Buddhahood. How can we not believe them?

It is my humble hope that no matter whether you are a layperson or a monk or nun, no matter whether you are smart or stupid, you will adopt a positive attitude toward this simple, direct, Sudden Perfect Pure Land teaching. (See Glossary for Sudden Perfect Teaching). Do not look upon it as difficult and shrink away from it. Do not look upon it as easy and become complacent and not try hard enough. Do not look upon it as shallow and despise it. Do not look upon it as profound and not dare to accept it as your task.

The name of Amitabha which we recite is truly inconceivable. But the True Mind of those who recite it is also truly inconceivable. If you recite the Buddha-name once, you are inconceivable for the time the sound of it lasts. If you recite it ten or a hundred or a thousand or a million times, or countless times, you are inconceivable all the while the sound of your recitation lasts.

In the next passage in the sutra, Buddha reiterates his advice:

> **I have seen this benefit, and so I speak these words. If sentient beings hear what I say, they must make a vow to be born in that land.**

Buddha says, "I have seen this benefit." The vision of the Buddha is the ultimate in clarity. The benefit he has seen is that through reciting the Buddha-name, sentient beings can transcend the world of the Five Corruptions, be reborn within the Four Lands, and reach the level where they do not backslide. *This benefit is brought about by the inconceivable merit of the Buddha-name.*

With reference to what happens when we die, this benefit is that our minds do not fall into delusion and error. In this polluted world, if we rely solely on self-effort in our practice, it is extremely hard to gain power over the crucial juncture of birth and death.

If there is the least bit of bad karma that you have not cleared away by the time you are about to die, you will plunge into an untoward rebirth -- this applies no matter whether you have ignorantly cultivated a misguided practice and trusted in your deluded intellect, or whether you have had some profound awakenings and your conduct has been consistent and correct. As the Pure Land Patriarch Yung-ming said, "Nine out of ten people who practice Zen meditation miss the road: scenes of delusion appear before them at death, and in an instant they follow them off." This is truly a chilling prospect! Even Arhats become deluded again as they emerge from the womb, and even Bodhisattvas can become benighted between death and a subsequent rebirth. Here, at the point of death, how can you forcibly act the master? If you expect to be so lucky, you are a fool.

The only way out is to have faith, vows, recite the Buddha-name and *rely on other-power*. Amitabha's vows of compassion are certainly not empty promises. If we have faith and vows and recite the Buddha-name, when we die Amitabha and the assembly of saints will appear before us to lead us away. That way we will not fail, and we will easily be reborn in the Pure Land.

Buddha saw that sentient beings' greatest suffering is to fall into confusion at the moment of death, and so he vouchsafed this Pure Land teaching to us. This is why he urged us again and again to take vows: because vows can guide us.

**Question*: If Buddha is a creation of the Mind, if Buddha is the Mind, why do you not speak of our own inherent Buddha as supreme? Why do you insist that another Buddha, Amitabha Buddha, is better?

Answer: This Pure Land teaching is all a matter of comprehending that Amitabha Buddha is precisely our own Buddha Nature, our Mind. If we mistakenly refer to the Buddha as "other", we would fall into one form of delusive view. If we were to overemphasize our own inherent Buddha, this would be another form of delusive view. Both are wrong.

Through our invoking the Buddha-name both at the phenomenal level and at the level of inner truth (noumenon), Amitabha and the assembly of saints appears before us: this is our inherent True Nature becoming manifest. Also, we are born in the Pure Land and see Amitabha and hear his teaching: this is perfecting the body of wisdom of our True Nature. This is not awakening through something other than ourselves.

The Pure Land teaching is profound and wondrous. It destroys all sophistry and cuts off all delusive views. Only those with the wisdom of Ashvaghosha, Nagarjuna, Chih-i and Yung-ming can take it up completely. Those of worldly intelligence, the followers of Confucianism and the devotees of Zen, may try to figure it out to the limit of their powers, but the more they think about it, the farther off they get. In terms of being able to reach the wisdom of the Buddhas and mesh with the wonders of the Path, such intellectuals are not as good as ordinary men and women who recite the Buddha-name in all sincerity.

"I have seen this benefit and so I speak these words". Buddha's eye and Buddha's voice clearly affirm this truth, so how can we dare to go against it? Shouldn't we accept it?

This concludes the commentary on the main body of the sutra.

The Pure Land method of developing faith and vows and reciting the Buddha-name both perfectly subsumes and perfectly surpasses all other Buddhist methods. *Vertically, it intermingles with all the Buddhist teachings; horizontally, it* stands apart from them.

Buddha spontaneously gave this Pure Land teaching without being asked.[26] Who is worthy to extol it and transmit it? Only when a Buddha communicates with a Buddha is it possible to fully express the absolute reality of all the teachings. This *Amitabha Sutra* is about a Buddha-realm, and it can only be transmitted from Buddha to Buddha.

[Text transmission]

The final part of the sutra deals with its transmission. This is in two sections: a general admonition to accept the teaching, and a concluding encouragement. Buddha says:

> **Right now I am extolling the benefits of the inconceivable virtues of Amitabha Buddha.**

The *virtues* of Amitabha are inconceivable in five senses.[27]

First, Amitabha enables us to transcend the triple world "horizontally," without having to wait until we cut off all delusion.

Second, Amitabha's Pure Land includes the Four Lands (the Land where Saints and Ordinary Beings Dwell Together, the Land of Expedient Liberation, the Land of Real Reward, and the Land of Eternally Quiescent Light), so that we do not have to go step-by-step from one to another (i.e. once reborn in the Pure Land, we will never retrogress).

Third, Amitabha's merit makes salvation possible for us by simply invoking his name, without having to resort to other methods, such as meditation (Zen) or visualization.

Fourth, Amitabha's merit makes salvation possible in one to seven days, without requiring many eons and many lifetimes.

Fifth, by invoking the name of one Buddha, Amitabha, we are protected and kept in mind by all the Buddhas.

All this is the result of the great vows and deeds of our guide and teacher Amitabha. That is why Buddha speaks of "the benefits of the inconceivable virtues of Amitabha Buddha."

Furthermore, when Pure Land practitioners recite the Buddha-name with faith and vows, they are gathering in all the virtues of Amitabha Buddha and making them their own. This is another reason why Buddha speaks of "the benefits of the inconceivable virtues of Amitabha Buddha."

Later on in the text, Sakyamuni Buddha speaks of "the inconceivable virtues of all the Buddhas" and also "my inconceivable virtues." *Here Sakyamuni Buddha is saying that all the Buddhas, as well as he himself, all consider Amitabha's virtues as their own.*

> **But in the eastern direction there are also countless other Buddhas, like Akshobhya Buddha, the Buddha "Marks of the Polar Mountain", the Buddha "Great Polar Mountain", the Buddha "Light of the Polar Mountain", and the Buddha "Wondrous Voice". Each of them, "extending his broad, long tongue", preaches in his own land and covers a whole cosmos, speaking these sincere**

> **words: "all of you sentient beings should believe this sutra extolling inconceivable virtues, which all Buddhas protect and keep in mind".**

"Akshobhya" means "Immovable". Each Buddha has countless virtues, and so he must have countless names, each established according to the teaching situation. Sometimes these names are based on causal conditions, sometimes on results achieved, sometimes on inherent nature, sometimes on apparent characteristics, sometimes on practices or vows or other things. Although each name only refers to one aspect of Buddhahood, each name still includes the four benefits a Buddha brings: joyful faith, helping others, counteracting evil, and witnessing absolute truth. Each name illustrates a particular quality of Buddhahood. If we were to try to express all the qualities of the Enlightened Ones, we could talk till the end of time and never be able to finish.

Space in the east is infinite, and there is an infinite number of worlds there. Since there is an infinite number of worlds, there is also an infinite number of Buddhas who dwell in those worlds. Thus the sutra refers to "countless other Buddhas." All these Buddhas are using their eloquence to urge us to have faith in this sutra. If we sentient beings still fail to have faith in this sutra, we are being utterly stupid and benighted.

One of the traditional marks of a Buddha is a "long, broad tongue". If an ordinary person tells no lies for three lifetimes, his tongue will be long enough to reach his nose. The Buddhas mentioned in this sutra have realized the wondrous Pure Land teaching of the Great Vehicle, and so their tongues are long and broad enough to cover a whole galaxy of worlds. This symbolizes that they are truly in accord with absolute reality -- it is fact, not fiction.

The title of the sutra as it circulates among us today, *The Amitabha Sutra Spoken by Buddha*, was devised by the master translator Kumarajiva, who knew that we Chinese like brevity. It skillfully matches the wondrous practice of reciting the Buddha-name. Master Hsuan-tsang translated the sutra with the longer title, *The Sutra Extolling the Pure Land Accepted by Buddha*. The two translations differ in style, but there is no change in the meaning.

> **In the worlds of the southern direction there are countless other Buddhas, like the Buddha "Lamp of the Sun and Moon", the Buddha "Light of Renown", the Buddha "Great Blazing Shoulders", the Buddha "Lamp of the Polar Mountain", and the Buddha "Infinite Vigor". Each of them, extending his broad, long tongue, preaches in his own land and covers a whole cosmos, speaking these sincere words: "all of you sentient beings should believe this sutra extolling inconceivable virtues, which all Buddhas protect and keep in mind".**

> In the worlds of the western direction there are countless other Buddhas, like the Buddha "Infinite Life", the Buddha "Innumerable Characteristics", the Buddha "Innumerable Banners", the Buddha "Great Light", the Buddha "Great Illumination", the Buddha "Jewel Appearance", and the Buddha "Light of Purity". Each of them, extending his broad, long tongue, preaches in his own land and covers a whole cosmos, speaking these sincere words: "all of you sentient beings should believe this sutra extolling inconceivable virtues, which all Buddhas protect and keep in mind".

The Buddha "Infinite Life" has the same name as Amitabha. In the worlds of the Ten Directions, Buddhas who share the same name are innumerable. It is also possible that the sutra here is referring to our guide and teacher Amitabha. For the sake of saving sentient beings, there is no harm in Buddha Amitabha praising what the Tathagata Sakyamuni teaches in this sutra.

> In the worlds of the northern direction there are countless other Buddhas, like the Buddha "Blazing Shoulders", the Buddha "Supreme Voice", the Buddha "Hard to Injure", the Buddha "Born of the Sun", and the Buddha "Netted

> Light". Each of them, extending his broad, long tongue, preaches in his own land and covers a whole cosmos, speaking these sincere words: "all of you sentient beings should believe this sutra extolling inconceivable virtues, which all Buddhas protect and keep in mind".

> In the worlds of the nadir there are countless other Buddhas, like the Buddha "Lion", the Buddha "Repute", the Buddha "Light", the Buddha "Dharma Banner", and the Buddha "Upholding the Dharma". Each of them, extending his broad, long tongue, preaches in his own land and covers a whole cosmos, speaking these sincere words: "all of you sentient beings should believe this sutra extolling inconceivable virtues, which all Buddhas protect and keep in mind".

Below our world (nadir) there is an infinite number of galaxies and beyond it there are also an infinite number of galaxies, including the Heavens of Desire, of Form, and the Formless Heavens, and so on.

The word "Dharma" means "teaching", "truth", "method".

> In the worlds of the zenith there are countless other Buddhas, like the Buddha

> "Pure Voice", the Buddha "Sojourner King", the Buddha "Incense Fragrance", the Buddha "Fragrant Light", the Buddha "Great Blazing Shoulders", the Buddha "Body of Multicolored Jewel Flower Garlands", the Buddha "Sala Tree King", the Buddha "Precious Flower Virtue", the Buddha "Sees All Truths", and the Buddha "Like the Polar Mountain". Each of them, extending his broad, long tongue, preaches in his own land and covers a whole cosmos, speaking these sincere words: "all of you sentient beings should believe this sutra extolling inconceivable virtues, which all Buddhas protect and keep in mind".

These are the infinite worlds that are located toward the zenith, above our mundane world. They too have many layers, and like our mundane world include Realms of Desire, of Form, and Formlessness, in an infinite number of levels.

**Question*: There are certainly pure lands in all directions, so why make a special point of praising Amitabha's Pure Land in the west?

Answer: This is not a good objection. If we made a point of praising Akshobhya's Pure Land in the east, you would wonder why we were emphasizing the eastern direction, and go on and on with your specious reasoning.

**Question*: Why not make the whole universe the focal point instead of Amitabha's Pure Land?

Answer: There are three reasons. We focus on Amitabha's Pure Land because this makes it easy for beginners to develop the Bodhi Mind, because Amitabha's fundamental vows are most powerful, and because Amitabha has a special affinity with the sentient beings in our world.

The Buddhas offer salvation to sentient beings, and sentient beings accept the Buddhas' teachings, but in this process there are differences in degrees of ease and profundity -- it is all a matter of karmic links.

Depending on where the karmic affinities of sentient beings lie, the Buddhas extend the virtue of their benevolence, and stimulate the development of those sentient beings with all kinds of teachings. They can enable sentient beings to experience joy in the teaching and have faith in it, they can spark the development of the seeds of goodness from past lives, they can make it hard for the barriers of delusion to screen sentient beings off from the truth, and they can enable sentient beings to bring forth their self-nature.

Fundamentally, all the Buddhas manifest their teaching activities from within the Dharmakaya. They solidify sentient beings' affinity with the truth and strengthen their seeds of enlightenment. Whether within the world or beyond it, the deeds of the Buddhas are all inconceivably great. They energize teaching vehicles and expound them to vast audiences. They plunge into the ocean of suffering where sentient beings dwell, and use their compassion to enable them to harmonize with the still light. Thus do the Buddhas exemplify the myriad virtues and epitomize the highest spiritual powers.

Finally, we must understand that the seeds of enlightenment come to fruition as a result of conditions. These conditions constitute the Dharma Realm as a whole. When the Buddhas are mindful of one, they are mindful of all, and when one dharma is born, all dharmas are born: there is one scent, one flower, one sound, one form.[28] When the Buddhas accept our repentance and give us a prediction of enlightenment, when they rub our heads and reach down their hands to us, they create universal reverberation in all the worlds of the past, present, and future in the Ten Directions.

Therefore, these conditions are called "the Dharma Realm of conditional arising". This is the meaning of remembering, of creating affinity with the Dharma Realm of the Ten Directions.

Ordinary people can simply resolve to seek rebirth in the Pure Land, while people at a profound level should not abandon Amitabha's Pure Land in the west and seek the Flower Store World (Vairocana Buddha's universal Pure Land) instead. If you think that Amitabha's Pure Land is an expedient device, but Vairocana's Flower Treasury World is a true reality, if you think that Amitabha's Pure Land is associated with the Lesser Vehicle, but Vairocana's Flower Store World belongs to the Mahayana teaching, you are completely under the sway of imaginary ideas and emotional clingings [see note 4]. Why? Because you have not comprehended that provisional teachings and the final teaching have a single essence, and that categories like Big Vehicle and Small Vehicle have no set identity.

> **Why do you think this is called the sutra that is protected and kept in mind by all the Buddhas?**
>
> **If there are good men or women who hear this scripture, uphold it and hear the names of all these Buddhas, these good men and women will be protected and kept in mind by all the Buddhas, and will not retrogress along the path of Supreme, Perfect Enlightenment.**
>
> **Therefore, all of you should faithfully accept what I say and what all the Buddhas have said.**

This sutra is devoted to revealing that the Mind is supreme. The names of various Buddhas also reveal their supreme, perfect, ultimate virtues. Thus, those who hear this sutra and the names of the Buddhas are protected and kept in mind by all the Buddhas. Those who hear this sutra and accept its teachings will consistently recite the name of Amitabha, and the name of Amitabha is itself protected and kept in mind by all of the Buddhas.

**Question*: What about those who only hear the names of the various Buddhas, but do not uphold the teachings of the sutra -- are they also kept in mind by all Buddhas and protected against backsliding?

Answer: There is a partial answer to this, and a comprehensive answer.

The *Sutra on Divining the Results of Good and Evil Karma* says that those who intone the Buddha-name in a confused, unfocused, defiled state of mind are not really "hearing" the Buddha-name and are incapable of decisive faith and understanding. By reciting the Buddha-name they only obtain conditioned merits in the human and celestial realms, but do not get the far-reaching and profoundly wondrous benefits of reciting the Buddha-name.

Those who singlemindedly recite the Buddha-name to the point of total concentration called "One-Practice Samadhi" achieve the mind of vast and wondrous virtues. This is called attaining the stage of quasi-Tolerance of Non-Birth (the forbearance that comes from realizing that all phenomena are unborn). By doing this these people truly hear the names of the Buddhas of the Ten Directions.

This is the way it must be with the sutra as well. After you hear it, you must put it into practice by reciting the Buddha-name. When you recite the Buddha-name to the point of singlemindedness, then you are really hearing the names of the Buddhas, and then you become protected and kept in mind by the Buddhas. This is the partial answer.

The comprehensive answer is this: The compassion of the Buddhas is inconceivable, and the virtues of their names are also inconceivable. Therefore, once you hear the Buddha-name, no matter whether you are mindful or not, or whether you believe in it or not, it always becomes the seed of an affinity with the truth. Moreover, when the Buddhas bring salvation to sentient beings, they do not sort out friends and enemies: they go on working tirelessly for universal salvation. If you hear the Buddha-name, Buddha is bound to protect you. How can there be any doubts about this?

Even those who have just heard the Buddha-name once share in the essential common nature of the Dharma body and have created the cause of their enlightenment in the long run, which they will never lose

The sutra uses the Sanskrit term *anuttara-samyak-sambodhi*, which means Supreme, Perfect Enlightenment. This is the ultimate fruit of the Great Vehicle.

To say you have reached the level where you do not fall back (non-retrogression) is another way of saying you will achieve Buddhahood in one lifetime. Thus Buddha urges all his listeners to believe in what this sutra is saying and accept it, and to have faith that the merit of hearing the Buddha-name is like this. Can we refuse to believe what Sakyamuni and all the other Buddhas have communicated to us?

***

This is the end of the section in which Buddha urges us to have faith in the sutra. Next Buddha urges us to make vows.

> **All of those who have vowed, or are vowing, or will vow to be born in the land of Amitabha Buddha reach the level where they do not retrogress from Supreme, Perfect Enlightenment. They are already born, are now being born, or will be born in that land. Therefore, all good men and women, if they have faith, must make a vow to be born in that land.**

Those who have vowed to be born in the Pure Land in the past have already been born there. Those who are now vowing to be born in the Pure Land will be born there at the end of this lifetime. Those who in future lives vow to be born in the Pure Land will be born there in the future. Here Buddha is demonstrating that vows that are made on the basis of pure faith are sure to come true. Without faith, we cannot make vows. Without vows and faith, rebirth cannot occur. That is why Buddha says, "If they have faith, they must vow to be born in that land."

Vows are a token of faith, and the key link for practice. Making vows is then a most crucial component. *When Buddha mentions vows, we must understand that faith and practice are included.* That is why he repeatedly urges us most earnestly to make vows.

When we vow to be born in Amitabha's Pure Land, we are demonstrating our *disgust* with the mundane world, and our *joy* in the Pure Land.

In feeling aversion to the mundane world, we are relying on the first two Noble Truths (the truth of suffering, and the truth of the formation of suffering), and taking two of the great vows of Bodhisattvas (to deliver all sentient beings from suffering, and to cut off countless afflictions).

In joyously seeking the Pure Land, we are relying on the other two Noble Truths (the truth of the path, and the truth of ending suffering), and taking the other two great vows of Bodhisattvas to master the endless variety of Buddhist teaching, and to consummate the Supreme Path. Because of such great vows, we will attain Supreme, Perfect Enlightenment and never retrogress.

**Question*: If we make vows now, is it not correct that all we can talk about is the life to come, not this present life?

Answer: There are two senses here. One concerns a lifetime called the present one. If we vow in the present life to recite the Buddha-name, when we die we are sure to be born in the Pure Land.

The other is about an instant called the present. If our mind accords with the Mind of Buddha Amitabha for one moment, we are born in the Pure Land for one moment. If we reach accord moment after moment, we are born in the Pure Land moment after moment. Wondrous cause and wondrous effect are not apart from the One Mind. They are like the two ends of a balance, going down and up and sometimes being level.

Why do we have to wait until our life in the mundane world is over before we can be born in the Pure Land's jewel ponds? All we have to do is develop faith and vows and recite the Buddha-name right now, and our lotus bud is already in bloom, and the image of the Pure Land's golden thrones appear before us -- *at that moment* we are no longer inhabitants of this Saha world.

Reciting the Buddha-name is then the highest form of the complete and sudden teaching: impossible to rationalize, difficult to conceive. Only those with great wisdom can truly understand and believe in it.

> **Just as I am now extolling the inconceivable virtues of all the Buddhas, all those Buddhas are likewise extolling my inconceivable virtues, with these words: "Sakyamuni Buddha is able to carry out a most difficult and rare task. In the Saha World, the World of Endurance, in an evil world of the Five Corruptions -- the corruption of the age, the corruption of views, the corruption of afflictions, the corruption of sentient beings, and the corruption of life -- he is able to achieve Supreme, Perfect Enlightenment, and to expound the Pure Land teaching, which all beings in all worlds find hard to believe."**

Although the virtues and wisdom of all the Buddhas are equal, the way they bestow their teachings differs in degrees of difficulty and ease.

Achieving enlightenment in the Pure Land is easy, compared to achieving enlightenment in our corrupt mundane world.

Explaining the Dharma to the sentient beings in the Pure Land is easy, compared to explaining the Dharma to the sentient beings in our corrupt mundane world.

Explaining the *gradual* form of the Buddhist Teaching to the sentient beings in our corrupt mundane world is easy, compared to explaining the *sudden* form of the Buddhist Teaching.

Explaining the sudden form of the Buddhist Teaching (other than Pure Land teachings) to the sentient beings in our corrupt mundane world is easy, compared to explaining the sudden Pure Land teaching of horizontal transcendence.[29]

Explaining the Pure Land teaching of *horizontal transcendence* with its sudden practice and sudden realization and wondrous contemplation is not easy. But the hardest of all is explaining this supreme skillful technique, this special surpassing wonder, this Pure Land method that goes beyond all conceptualizations, and teaches us that we do not need laborious cultivation, but *have only to recite the Buddha-name in order to ascend directly to the level where we do not fall back from the path to enlightenment*. That is why all the Buddhas of the Ten Directions put forward our Sakyamuni Buddha as the most valiant of all.

The sutra speaks of the world of the Five Corruptions (Turbidities). What does this mean?

The *corruption of the age* means that this is a time when wars and natural disasters are rife. If not for the Pure Land practice which enables us to transcend the mundane world "horizontally", taking our karmic burden along with us, deliverance would surely be impossible.

The *corruption of views* means that misguided, perverse views proliferate: the view that our bodies are entities we possess, the view that we are annihilated after death or else live on forever, the view that there is no cause and effect, the view that what we cling to with our arbitrary opinions is best, and the view that we will find salvation by our own subjectively chosen methods. Because we are deluded by such views and utterly submerged in them, this is called the corruption of views. Amidst the corruption of views, if we do not make use of the expedient means of the Pure Land teaching to discover our Mind, we surely cannot be saved.

The *corruption of afflictions* means that compulsions and confusions caused by greed, anger, ignorance, arrogance, and doubt are increasing more and more, causing trouble and chaos. Amidst the corruption of afflictions, without the Pure Land practice that affirms that our ordinary minds are one with the Buddha-Mind, we surely cannot be saved.

Under the influence of the corruption of views and the corruption of afflictions, the Five Skandhas mix together in a coarse and debased way, giving rise to what are provisionally called sentient beings; hence the term, the *corruption of sentient beings.* Sentient beings are debased both at the level of form and at the level of mind, so they are called corrupt. Given the corruption of the human condition, *without the practice of shunning the mundane world and joyfully seeking the Pure Land, salvation is impossible.*

The *corruption of life* means that our causal basis and hence the results we realize are both degenerate, and our life spans are shortened, and do not reach a hundred years, so they are called corrupt. Given the corruption of life, we cannot be saved without the Pure Land practice.

Moreover, faith and vows and recitation of the name of Amitabha transform the corruption of the age into an an assembly of purity, transform the corruption of views into infinite light, transform the corruption of afflictions into the eternal still light, transform the corruption of sentient beings into beings born by transformation from lotuses in the Pure Land, and transform the corruption of life into infinite life.

Thus each recitation of the Buddha-name is a method of achieving the mind of Supreme, Perfect Enlightenment practiced by our fundamental teacher, Sakyamuni Buddha, in the midst of this evil world of the Five Corruptions. In this sutra, Sakyamuni Buddha is taking the whole essence of this enlightenment and bestowing it on sentient beings of this evil and corrupt world. This is the realm which all the Buddhas experience, and which only the Buddhas can experience fully. It is not something which those in the planes of the hell-beings, the hungry ghosts, the animals, the asuras, the human beings, the devas, the shravakas, the pratyekas, or even the Bodhisattvas can fully comprehend by their own power.

When the other Buddhas extol Sakyamuni for teaching the Pure Land method to "sentient beings," this means the people in our evil world of the Five Corruptions. When the sutra mentions "all worlds," it means all the worlds sentient beings inhabit.

The previous admonition to believe in the Pure Land teaching was the command of all the Buddhas. Below is the exhortation of our teacher Sakyamuni Buddha. Here Sakyamuni addresses all sentient beings in the Dharma Realm, as the Buddhas before addressed themselves to "all you sentient beings." We must realize that the Bodhisattvas like Manjushri and the Arhats like Mahakashyapa are also included among those to whom this command is given.

> **Know then that in the midst of this evil world of the Five Corruptions, I am able to carry out this difficult task, attain Supreme, Perfect Enlightenment, and expound the Pure Land teaching, which is so hard for beings in all worlds to believe. This is indeed most difficult!**

The single practice of faith, vows, and reciting the Buddha-name is not for the purpose of mundane benefits; it can effect the complete transformation of the world of the Five Corruptions. Only through faith can we enter this realm; mere thinking cannot get us to it.

If it were not for our fundamental teacher Sakyamuni Buddha entering into our evil world, showing the attainment of enlightenment, and using his great wisdom and great compassion to reveal this, practice this, and teach this, how would sentient beings have received this message?

We live amidst the corruption of the age, and we are certainly imprisoned by our time, and harried by suffering.

We live amidst the corruption of views, and we are certainly enmeshed in misguided knowledge, and deluded by false teachers.

We live amidst the corruption of afflictions, and we are certainly ensnared by craving and desire, and burdened by bad karma.

We live amidst the corruption of sentient beings, and we certainly rest complacently in stinking filth, without being aware of it; we are willing to stay degraded and weak, without exerting ourselves to rise any higher.

We live amidst the corruption of life, and we are certainly swallowed up by impermanence, with our lives flashing by too quickly for us to cope.

If we do not deeply understand the severe difficulties we are facing, if we think that there is some other method besides Pure Land practice that can extricate us from the Five Corruptions, we are lost in a welter of empty arguments inside a burning house.

Only if we deeply realize the seriousness of the difficulties we are facing will we be willing to eradicate our dishonest attitudes, and value Pure Land practice for the treasure it is. This is why our teacher Sakyamuni Buddha went to such lengths to explain to us what a dire situation we are in and make us realize the implications.

Finally the sutra reaches its conclusion:

> **When Buddha finished preaching this scripture, Shariputra and all the monks, gods, humans, asuras and others who had been listening, having heard what the Buddha said, rejoiced and faithfully accepted it. They all bowed in homage and departed.**

The Pure Land teaching is inconceivable. It is difficult to believe in and difficult to understand; no one could have asked Buddha about it. But Buddha in his wisdom discerned the dynamics of the situation and realized that the circumstances were ripe for sentient beings to become enlightened. *Thus he expounded the Pure Land teaching without being asked, to enable sentient beings to benefit by hearing the truth, to benefit by helping others and doing good, to benefit by shunning evil, and to benefit by experiencing the supreme truth.*

Buddha's Pure Land teaching was like timely rain, and thus his listeners "rejoiced and faithfully accepted it." "Rejoiced" means they felt delight of the body and mind. "Faithfully" means they had no doubts or ambivalence. "Accepted it" means they took it in and would never forget it. The phrase "they all bowed in homage" signifies that they were moved by the Buddha's great benevolence, and entrusted themselves to him. Their departure signifies that they went on to practice consistently according to what Buddha had taught them, and never turned back.

Afterword

The sutra says: "In the Dharma-Ending Age, hundreds of millions of people will cultivate Buddhist practices, but there will rarely be even one who attains enlightenment. They will only find salvation if they rely on reciting the Buddha-name."

Alas! Our contemporary age is precisely the time of which the sutra is speaking. If we abandon this inconceivably powerful method of reciting the Buddha-name, how can we become pure?

When I first left home and became a monk, I prided myself on being a follower of Zen, and I looked down on the sutras. I wrongly imagined that reciting the Buddha-name was an adaptation of Buddhism suited for those of average and below average capacities.

Later on, due to a grave illness, I developed the aspiration to go to Amitabha's Pure Land. After I studied various Pure Land writings, like the commentaries *Miao-tsung* and *Yuan-chung* as well as the *Commentary on the Amitabha Sutra* by Chu-hung, I finally came to realize that the Buddha-Recitation Samadhi is truly the supreme jewel. Only then did I become utterly focused on reciting the Buddha-name -- wild horses couldn't drag me away from it.

A friend of mine who was a long-time Pure Land practitioner wanted to make the great meaning of the *Amitabha Sutra* clearly apparent in straightforward language, so he asked me to set forth an explanation of the essentials of the sutra. My wish is to enable all sentient beings in the world to be born together in the Pure Land. I could not refuse to serve a good cause, so I set to work writing this commentary in late autumn, 1647, and completed the draft nine days later.

My hope is that every line and every word of this commentary will serve as "life provisions"[30] for Pure Land practitioners, and that everyone who reads or hears about it will progress to the level where there is no falling back. May those who have faith in it and those who are in doubt about it both plant seeds of enlightenment. May those who praise it and those who slander it alike reach liberation.[31]

I hope that this commentary is accepted and approved by all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. I hope my fellow students and friends will be happy with this work and grant me their protection.

Written by Ou-i, a man of the Path, age forty-nine.

गुल्मी, थानपति-२ निवासी वेदराज ज्ञवालीद्वारा
...वाल्मीकि विद्यापीठ पुस्तकालयलाई
उपहार स्वरूप........प्रदान।
२०६२।११।२४

From all delusions, karma, and demon-states,
Amid all worldly paths, I will be freed,
As the lotus does not touch the water,
As sun and moon do not stop in space.

The Vows of Samantabhadra
Avatamsaka Sutra

Appendix

The Practices and Vows of the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra

(Avatamsaka Sutra, ch. 40)

Buddhist Text Translation Society

Note to the Reader

The *Avatamsaka Sutra*, which is described by D.T. Suzuki as the "epitome of Buddhist thought, Buddhist sentiment and Buddhist experience," consists of eighty-one fascicles, divided into forty chapters. The chapter on "The Practices and Vows of the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra," the last and best-known chapter, represents the essence of Bodhisattva practice.

> The Great Vows of Samantabhadra are the right *causes* of Buddhahood and the pure *conditions* for rebirth in the Pure Land. For precisely this reason, the ancients, down through the centuries, have copied, printed and disseminated this chapter separately, so that everyone may recite it and put its teachings into practice.
>
> Precisely because these practices and vows contain the right causes of Buddhahood as well as the pure conditions for rebirth in the Pure Land, the ancients have also excerpted several passages and incorporated them in the daily liturgy of the faithful.
>
> During his lifetime, Elder Master Yin Kuang frequently lectured on this chapter to encourage Pure Land practice and to demonstrate that rebirth in the Western Land is the common vow of the Bodhisattvas in the Ocean-Wide Avatamsaka Assembly. *(Master Thích Trí Tịnh.)*

The following passages are excerpted from the translation prepared by the Buddhist Text Translation Society, Talmadge, California. We have made a number of changes to correspond to the main part of this book -- for which we beg the indulgence of the original translators.

Avatamsaka Sutra,
chapter 40:

Practices and Vows of the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra[32]

(Translated into Chinese by the Indian Master Prajna in the eighth century A.D.)

At that time, having praised the exalted merits and virtues of Buddha Vairocana, the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra addressed the assembled Bodhisattvas, along with Sudhana, as follows:

"Good men, even if all the Buddhas of the ten directions were to speak continuously, for as many eons as there are fine motes of dust in an incalculable number of Buddha-lands (worlds), the merits and virtues of the Buddha could never be fully described.

"Those wishing to achieve these merits and virtues should cultivate ten vast and great practices and vows. What are these ten?

First, Pay homage and respect to all Buddhas.
Second, Praise the Buddhas.
Third, Make abundant offerings.
Fourth, Repent misdeeds and evil karmas (actions).
Fifth, Rejoice in others' merits and virtues.
Sixth, Request the Buddhas to teach.
Seventh, Request the Buddhas to remain in the world.
Eighth, Follow the teachings of the Buddhas at all times.
Ninth, Accommodate and benefit all living beings.
Tenth, Transfer all merits and virtues universally."

[After explaining the significance of the first eight vows, the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra continues.]

Ninth Vow

"**S**udhana, *to accommodate and benefit all living beings* is explained like this: throughout the oceans of worlds in the ten directions exhausting the Dharma Realm (cosmos) and the realms of empty space, there are many different kinds of living beings. That is to say, there are those born from eggs, the womb-born, the transformationally born, as well as those who live and rely on earth, water, fire, and air for their existence. There are beings dwelling in space, and those who are born in and live in plants and trees. This includes all the many species and races with their diverse bodies, shapes, appearances, lifespans, families, names, and natures. This includes their many varieties of knowledge and views, their various desires and pleasures, their thoughts and deeds, and their many different behaviors, clothing and diets.

"It includes beings who dwell in different villages, towns, cities and palaces, as well as gods, dragons, and others of the Eight Divisions,[33] humans and non-humans alike. Also there are footless beings, beings with two feet, four feet, and many feet, with form and without form, with thought and without thought, and not entirely with thought and not entirely without thought.

"I will accord with and take care of all these many kinds of beings, providing all manner of services and offerings for them. I will treat them with the same respect I show my own parents, teachers, elders, Arhats, and even the Buddhas. I will serve them all equally without difference.

"I will be a good physician for the sick and suffering. I will lead those who have lost their way to the right road. I will be a bright light for those in the dark night, and cause the poor and destitute to uncover hidden treasures.

"The Bodhisattva impartially benefits all living beings in this manner.

"Why is this? If a Bodhisattva accords with living beings, then he accords with and makes offerings to all Buddhas. If he can honor and serve living beings, then he honors and serves the Buddhas. If he makes living beings happy, he is making all Buddhas happy. Why is this? It is because all Buddhas take the mind of Great Compassion as their substance. Because of living beings, they develop Great Compassion. From Great Compassion the Bodhi Mind[34] is born; and because of the Bodhi Mind, they accomplish Supreme, Perfect Enlightenment (Buddhahood).

"It is like a great regal tree growing in the rocks and sand of barren wilderness. When the roots get water, the branches, leaves, flowers, and fruits will all flourish. The regal bodhi-tree growing in the wilderness of Birth and Death is the same. All living beings are its roots; all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are its flowers and fruits. By benefitting all beings with the water of Great Compassion, one can realize the flowers and fruits of the Bodhisattvas' and Buddhas' wisdom. Why is this? It is because by benefitting living beings with the water of Great Compassion, the Bodhisattvas can attain Supreme, Perfect Enlightenment. Therefore, Bodhi belongs to living beings. *Without living beings, no Bodhisattva could achieve Supreme, Perfect Enlightenment.*

"Good man, you should understand these principles in this way: When the mind is impartial towards all living beings, one can accomplish full and perfect Great Compassion. By using the mind of Great Compassion to accord with living beings, one perfects the *offering of the Dharma*[35] to the Buddhas. In this way the Bodhisattva constantly accords with living beings.

"Even when the realms of empty space are exhausted, the realms of living beings are exhausted, the karmas of living beings are exhausted, and the afflictions of living beings are exhausted, I will still accord endlessly, continuously, in thought after thought, without cease. My body, speech and mind never weary of these deeds.

Tenth Vow

"**M**oreover, good man, *to transfer all merits and virtues universally* is explained like this: all the merits and virtues, from the first vow, to pay homage and respect, up to and including the vow to accommodate and benefit all living beings, I universally transfer to all living beings throughout the Dharma Realm (cosmos) and to the limits of empty space. I vow that all living beings will be constantly peaceful and happy without sickness or suffering. I vow that no one will succeed in doing any evil, but that all will quickly perfect their cultivation of good karma. I vow to shut the door to evil destinies and open the right paths of humans, gods and that of

Nirvana. I will stand in for living beings and receive all the extremely severe fruits of suffering which they bring about with their evil karma. I will liberate all these beings and ultimately bring them to accomplish unsurpassed Bodhi (Buddhahood). The Bodhisattva cultivates transference in this way.

"Even when the realms of empty space are exhausted, the realms of living beings are exhausted, the karmas of living beings are exhausted, and the afflictions of living beings are exhausted, I will still transfer all merits and virtues endlessly, continuously, in thought after thought without cease. My body, speech and mind never weary of these deeds.[36]

"Good man, these are the Ten Great Vows of the great Bodhisattvas in their entirety. If all Bodhisattvas can follow and abide by these Great Vows, then they will succeed in bringing all living beings to maturity. They will be able to accord with the path of Supreme, Perfect Enlightenment and complete Samantabhadra's sea of conduct and vows. Therefore, good man, you should know the meaning of this ....

"Further, when a person who recites these vows is on the verge of death, at the last instant of life, when all his faculties scatter and he departs from his relatives, when all power and status are lost and nothing survives, when "his Prime Minister, great officials, his inner court and outer cities, his elephants, horses, carts, and treasuries of precious jewels" can no longer accompany him, these Great Vows alone will stay with him. At all times they will guide him forward, and in a single instant he will be reborn in the Land of Ultimate Bliss. Arriving there, he will see Amitabha Buddha, the Bodhisattvas Manjusri, Samantabhadra, Avalokitesvara, Maitreya, and others. The appearance of these Bodhisattvas will be magnificent and their merits and virtues complete. Together they will surround him.

"This person will see himself born from a lotus flower[37] and will receive a prediction of Buddhahood. Thereafter, he will pass through an incalculable number of eons and, with his power of wisdom, he will accord with the minds of living beings in order to benefit them everywhere, throughout the countless worlds of the ten directions.

"Before long he will sit in a Bodhimandala (place of Enlightenment), subdue the demonic armies, accomplish Supreme, Perfect Enlightenment, and turn the wonderful Dharma wheel (preach Buddhism). He will cause living beings in worlds as numerous as the fine motes of dust in Buddha-lands to develop the Bodhi Mind (Mind of Enlightenment).

"According with their inclinations and basic natures, he will teach, transform, and bring them to maturity.

"To the exhaustion of the oceans of future eons, he will greatly benefit all living beings ...."

***

At that time, the great Bodhisattva Samantabhadra, wishing to restate his meaning, contemplated everywhere in the ten directions and spoke in verse.

1 - Before the Buddhas, "Lions Among Men",[38]
throughout the worlds of the ten directions,
In the past, in the present, and also in the future,
With body, speech and mind entirely pure,
I bow before them all, omitting none.

With the awesome power of Samantabhadra's vows,
I appear at the same time before every Buddha,
And in transformed bodies as numerous as motes of dust in all lands,
Bow to Buddhas as numerous as motes of dust in all lands.

2 - With oceans of sound I everywhere let fall
Words and phrases, wonderful and endless,
Which now and through all the eons of the future,
Praise the wide, deep sea of the Buddhas' merits and virtues.

3 - Flower garlands, supreme and wonderful,
Music, perfumes, parasols, and canopies,

And other decorations rich and rare,
I offer up to every Buddha.

Fine clothing, superior incense,
Powdered and burning incense, lamps and candles,
Each one heaped as high as mount Sumeru,
I offer completely to all Buddhas.

With a vast, great, supremely liberated mind,
I believe in all Buddhas of the three periods of time;
With the strength of Samantabhadra's conduct and vows,
I make offerings to all Buddhas everywhere.

4 - For all the evil deeds I have done in the past,
Created by my body, speech, and mind,
From beginningless greed, anger, and delusion,
I now know shame and repent them all.

5 - I rejoice in the merits and virtues
Of all beings in the ten directions,
From the most humble to the Arhats,
Pratyeka Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and Buddhas.

6 - Before the "Lights of the Worlds" of the
ten directions,
Who have just accomplished Supreme Bodhi,
I now request and beseech them all
To turn the foremost, wondrous Dharma wheel.[39]

7 - If there are Buddhas who wish for Nirvana,
I request with deep sincerity
That they dwell in the world for a long time,
To bring benefits and bliss to every being.

The good roots gained
From following and rejoicing in merit
and virtue
And from repentance and reform,
I transfer to living beings and the Buddha Way.

8 - I study with the Buddhas and practice
The perfect conduct of Samantabhadra;
I make offerings to all the Buddhas of the past
And to all present Buddhas throughout the ten directions.

All future "Teachers of Gods and Men"
Whose aspirations and vows have been completed,
I will follow in study throughout the three periods of time
And quickly attain Great Bodhi ...

I vow that every being in all directions
Will be peaceful, happy, and without worry.
May they obtain the proper Dharma's profound aid,
And may all their afflictions be wiped away,
without exception.

In my practice, striving for Buddhahood,[40]
I will gain the knowledge of my past lives
in all destinies.
I will always leave the home-life and cultivate
pure precepts,
Without default, never broken, and without stain.

Be they gods, dragons, yakshas, or kumbhandas,
Humans, non-humans, and the rest,
In the many languages of all such living beings,
With every sound I will speak the Dharma.

I will cultivate the pure Paramitas with vigor,
And never abandon the Bodhi Mind.
I will banish all obstructions and defilements,
And fulfill all wondrous practices.

From all delusions, karmas, and demon-states,[41]
Amid all worldly paths, I will be freed,
As the lotus does not touch the water,
As sun and moon do not stop in space.

9 - Ending the sufferings of the paths of evil,
And to everyone equally bringing joy,
May I for eons like the motes of dust
in all lands
Ever benefit all in the ten directions.

Always in accord with living beings,
Cultivating through all future eons
The vast conduct of Samantabhadra,
The unsurpassed Great Bodhi will I perfect.

I vow always to meet Buddhas face to face
And the hosts of disciples who gather around them;
I will raise offerings which are vast and great,
Untiring to the end of future eons.

I will hold high the subtly wondrous Dharma
And illuminate all the practices of Bodhi;
I will be ultimately pure in Samantabhadra's way,
Practicing until the end of time.

Inexhaustible blessings and wisdom
I cultivate throughout all worlds;
By concentration, wisdom, skillful means,
and samadhis,
I will gain an endless store of merits and virtues.

In one mote of dust are lands as numerous as motes of
dust;[42]
In each land are incalculable numbers of Buddhas.
In every place where Buddhas dwell I see the host
assembled,
Endlessly proclaiming all the practices of Bodhi.

In ten directions everywhere, throughout the sea of
lands,
Every hair-tip encompasses oceans of past, present and
future.[43]
So, too, there is a sea of Buddhas, a sea of Buddha
lands;
Pervading them all I cultivate for seas of endless time.

The speech of all Buddhas is pure;
Each word contains an ocean of sounds.
According with what beings like to hear,
The Buddhas' sea of eloquence flows forth ...

I can penetrate the future
And exhaust all eons in a single thought.
In a single thought I compress
All eons of the three periods of time.[44]

In one thought I see all "Lions of Men"
Of the past, present, and future;

I constantly fathom the Buddhas' states,
Their magical samadhis and their awesome strength.

On the tip of an extremely fine hair,
Appear jewelled lands of past, present and future;
Lands on hair-tips as numerous as dust motes in all
lands of the ten directions,
I deeply enter, adorn, and purify ...

The sea of lands I everywhere adorn and purify,
And I liberate all living beings, without exception.
With skill I make selections from among the sea of
Dharmas
And enter deeply into the wisdom sea ...

Each Buddha has an elder disciple
Named Samantabhadra, Honored One.
I now transfer all good roots, and I vow
To perform deeds of wisdom identical to his.

I vow that my body, speech and mind will be
forever pure,
And that all practices and lands will be also.
I vow in every way to be identical
To the wisdom of Samantabhadra.

I will wholly purify Samantabhadra's conduct,
And the great vows of Manjusri[45] *as well.*
All their deeds I will fulfill, leaving nothing undone.
Till the end of time I will never tire.

Infinite and measureless is my cultivation;
Boundless merit and virtue I obtain.

Amid limitless practices I will dwell in peace,
And penetrate the strength of spiritual powers.

10 - Manjusri has wisdom, courage and bravery;
Samantabhadra's conduct and wisdom are the same.
I now transfer all good roots
In order to follow them in practice and in study ...

In the three periods of time, all Buddhas praise
Such vows as these, lofty and great.
I now transfer all good roots, wishing to perfect
The supreme practices of Samantabhadra.

I vow that when my life approaches its end,
All obstructions will be swept away;
I will see Amitabha Buddha,
And be born in his Land of Ultimate Bliss and Peace.[46]

When reborn in the Western Land,
I will perfect and completely fulfill,
Without exception, these Great Vows,
To delight and benefit all beings.

The Assembly of Amitabha Buddha is completely pure;
When from a matchless lotus I am reborn,
I will behold the Buddha's Measureless Light as He
appears before me
To bestow a prediction of Buddhahood.

Receiving a prediction from the Buddha,
I will take countless appearances and forms,
And with wisdom power vast and great, pervade ten directions
To benefit all the realms of living beings.

Realms of worlds in empty space might reach an end,
And living beings, karmas and afflictions be
extinguished;
But they will never be exhausted,
And neither will my vows.

With myriad jewels in boundless lands in all
directions,
I make decorations and offerings to the Buddhas.
For eons as numerous as the motes of dust in
all lands,
I bring the foremost peace and joy to gods and humans.

Yet, if anyone believes in these Great Vows,
As they pass by the ear but a single time,
And in search of Bodhi thirstily craves these vows,
The merits and virtues gained will surpass these
offerings.[47]

With bad advisors forever left behind,
From paths of evil he departs for eternity,
Soon to see the Buddha of Limitless Light
And perfect Samantabhadra's Supreme Vows.

Easily obtaining the blessings of long life,
Assured of a noble rebirth in the human realm,
Before long he will perfect and complete
The practices of Samantabhadra.

In the past, owing to a lack of wisdom power,
The five offenses of extreme evil he has committed;

In one thought they can all be wiped away by reciting
The Great Vows of Samantabhadra.

His clan, race, features and characteristics
With his wisdom are all perfected and complete;
Demons and externalists will have no way to harm him,
And he will be a field of merits[48] *in the Triple Realm.*

To the regal Bodhi tree he will quickly go,
And seated there subdue hordes of demons.
Supremely and perfectly enlightened, he will turn the
Dharma wheel,
To benefit all sentient beings.

If anyone can read, recite, receive, and hold high
Samantabhadra's Vows and proclaim them,
His reward only the Buddhas will know,[49]
And he will obtain Supreme Enlightenment.

If anyone recites Samantabhadra's Vows,
I will speak of a portion of his good roots:
In one single thought he can fulfill
The pure vows of sentient beings.

The supreme and endless blessings from
Samantabhadra's conduct
I now universally transfer;
May every living being, drowning and adrift,
Soon return to the Pure Land, the Land of
Limitless Light!

***

When the Great Bodhisattva Samantabhadra finished speaking these pure verses on the Great Vows of Samantabhadra before the Buddha, the youth Sudhana was overwhelmed with boundless joy. All the Bodhisattvas were extremely happy as well, and the Buddha applauded saying, "Good indeed, good indeed! ..."

Faith is the basis of the Path, the
mother of virtues,
Nourishing and growing all good ways,
Cutting away the net of doubt,
Freeing from the torrent of passion ...
Faith can assure arrival at enlightenment.

Avatamsaka Sutra

Editors' Notes

1. "The Pure Land School is presently the school of Buddhism in China and Japan that has the most followers." (*The Shambhala Dictionary of Buddhism and Zen*, p. 174.) According to Jean Eracle (Curator, Museum of Ethnography, Geneva), Pure Land has more than a hundred million adherents worldwide. (*Trois Soutras et un Traité sur la Terre Pure*, p. 7.)

2. Since every school or method is an expedient, adapted to a particular target audience, each one is perfect and complete for a given person or group at a given time. See also the following passage from D.T. Suzuki:

> Buddhist theology has a fine comprehensive theory to explain the manifold types of experience in Buddhism, which look so contradictory to each other. In fact the history of Chinese Buddhism is a series of attempts to reconcile the diverse schools ... Various ways of classification and reconciliation were offered, and ... their conclusion was this: Buddhism supplies us with so many gates to enter into the truth because of such a variety of human characters and temperaments and environments due to diversities of karma. This is plainly depicted and taught

> by the Buddha himself when he says that the same water drunk by the cow and the cobra turns in one case into nourishing milk and in the other into deadly poison, and that medicine is to be given according to disease. This is called the doctrine of [skillful] means ... (*The Eastern Buddhist*, Vol. 4, No. 2, p. 121.)

3. See the following passage, by the late founder of the Buddhist Lodge and Buddhist Society (London), on the true goal of all Buddhist practice:

> In the West, the need for some guidance in mind-development was made acute ... by a sudden spate of books which were, whatever the motive of their authors, dangerous in the extreme. No word was said in them of the sole right motive for mind-development, *the enlightenment of the meditator for the benefit of all mankind* [i.e., development of the Bodhi Mind], and the reader was led to believe that it was quite legitimate to study and practice mindfulness, and the higher stages which ensue, for the benefit of business efficiency and the advancement of personal prestige. In these circumstances, *Concentration and Meditation* ... was compiled and published by the [British] Buddhist Society, with constant stress on the importance of right motive, and ample warning of the dangers, from a headache to insanity, which lie in wait for those who trifle with the greatest force on earth, the human mind. (Christmas Humphreys, *The Buddhist Way of Life*, p. 100.)

4. The *Avatamsaka Sutra* teaches the interpenetration of all dharmas – the smallest dharma contains the largest and vice versa. As a modern example, a single computer chip can contain numerous books. This teaching is clearly expressed in

chapter 26 of the sutra, which describes the last phases of practice of a Bodhisattva before final Buddhahood. In that chapter, it is taught that at each and every stage, *the actions of the Bodhisattva "never go beyond Buddha Recitation"*:

> This is a summary of the tenth stage of enlightening beings, called Cloud of Teaching ... Whatever acts they undertake, whether through giving, or kind speech, or beneficial action, or cooperation, it is all never apart from thoughts of Buddha [Buddha Recitation], the Teaching, the Community ... (Thomas Cleary, tr., *The Flower Ornament Scripture [Avatamsaka Sutra]*, Vol. II, p. 111.)

5. The strength and pervasiveness of Pure Land are such that its main practice, Buddha Recitation, is found in other schools, including the Tantric and Zen schools. In Pure Land, Buddha Recitation is practiced for the immediate purpose of achieving rebirth in the Land of Amitabha Buddha. In the Tantric school, the immediate aim is to destroy evil karma and afflictions and generate blessings and wisdom in the current lifetime. In Zen, the koan of Buddha Recitation is meant to sever delusive thought and realize the Self-Nature True Mind. The *ultimate goal* of all three schools is, of course, the same: to achieve Enlightenment and Buddhahood.

6. The importance of vows is illustrated by the following story:

> Once Sakyamuni Buddha and his disciple Mahamaudgalyayana went with a large gathering of followers to another country to convert living beings. When the citizens saw the Buddha they shut their doors and ignored him. When they saw Maudgalyayana,

> however, they ran to greet him, and everyone, from the King and ministers to the citizens, all bowed and competed to make offerings to him. The Buddha's disciples thought this most unfair. "World Honored One," they said, "your virtuous conduct is so lofty; why is it that they do not make offerings to you, but instead compete to make offerings to Maudgalyayana?"
>
> "This is because of past affinities," said the Buddha. "I will tell you.
>
> "Limitless aeons ago, Maudgalyayana and I were fellow-countrymen. He gathered firewood in the mountains and I lived in a hut below. A swarm of bees was bothering me and I decided to smoke them out. But Maudgalyayana refused to help even though they stung him until his hands were swollen and painful. Instead, he made a vow, 'It must be miserable to be a bee,' he thought. 'I vow that when I attain the Way I will try to save these asura-like bees first thing!'
>
> "Many lifetimes later the bees were reborn as the citizens of this country. The queen bee became the King, the drones became the ministers, and the workers became the citizens. Because I didn't like the bees, I now have no affinity with these people and therefore no one makes offerings to me. But because of his vow, all the citizens revere Maudgalyayana".

According to the Buddha, as sentient beings, we all have strong attachments – particularly to our bodies and possessions. At the time of death, as we are about to lose both body and posessions, our consciousness, impelled by these deep-seated attachments, rushes to reincarnate itself in another body. *It is* *at this juncture that vows, particularly the vow for rebirth in the Pure Land, are crucial*: instead of just following our karma, good and evil, we may, through the power of these vows, achieve rebirth in the Pure Land.

7. See Glossary, *Three Pure Land Sutras*.

8. Note Dr. D.T. Suzuki's view on the relevance of Pure Land:

> Dr. Suzuki is generally associated with the Zen school, so it is often a matter of surprise to hear that he translated many Pure Land Buddhist texts into English and nourished a belief that Pure Land rather than Zen might be the form of Buddhism most suitable for Westerners. (John Snelling, *The Buddhist Handbook*, p. 216.)
>
> Most Buddhists in the world, by far the vast majority, practice a Faith or devotional form of worship. Dr. D.T. Suzuki strongly believed that the direction American Buddhism would take was towards Shin Buddhism [Pure Land] and its practice of Faith. It may turn out at this time that most Westerners, originally seeking personal enlightenment, will find themselves choosing a devotional path. (Ryushin Sarah Grayson in *Butsumon*, Fall 1989.)

9. Although most sutras are preached by the Buddhas, there are instances where the words of Bodhisattvas are recorded as sutras. A case in point is the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, chapter 40, where the Buddha merely signifies His approval at the end with the words "Sadhu, sadhu" ("Good indeed, good indeed").

10. See the following explanation of the same basic principle by Master Hsuan Hua:

> This sutra is a Mahayana Dharma ... and takes the Real Mark as its substance. The Real Mark is no mark. There is no mark, nothing at all, and yet there is nothing which is not marked. *Unmarked, it is true emptiness, and with nothing unmarked, it is wonderful existence* ... True Suchness, the One True Dharma Realm, the Thus Come One's Store Nature, all are different names for the Real Mark (Hsuan Hua, *A General Explanation of the Buddha Speaks of Amitabha Sutra* [the *Amitabha Sutra*], p. 23).

The teaching of the Mind "creating" sentient beings and the environment, expressed in many Mahayana sutras such as the *Avatamsaka, Surangama* and *Lotus Sutras,* is epitomized in the following stanzas:

If one wishes to understand fully
All Buddhas of all time,
He should contemplate the nature of the Dharma Realm
Everything is made from Mind alone (*Avatamsaka Sutra*, ch. 20).

One wholesome thought is the condition
for the creation of the Buddha-lands;
One errant thought is the very cause
of the nine realms of samsara.

> This does not mean creation in the sense of creating something out of nothing. This doctrine means that practically speaking, the world only "exists" as such because of our awareness, and that what we take to be the world in itself is our experience and inference based thereon. The conceptual order which is taken to be characteristic of objective reality is, according to this doctrine, a projection of the mind, a description that filters and shapes experience in accord with mental habits developed throughout the history of the species, the civilization, and the individual.

(Thomas Cleary, *The Flower Ornament Scripture* [the *Avatamsaka Sutra*], Vol. One, p. 23).

11. For an in-depth explanation of this concept, please refer to *Pure Land Buddhism: Dialogues with Ancient Masters*, Part I, Patriarch Chih I, Question 10 (Sutra Translation Committee, publisher).

12. *Singleminded recitation.* This concept is understood in two ways. For the Patriarch Chih-i, Master Ou-i and others of the T'ien-t'ai, Zen and Avatamsaka traditions, it is equivalent to *concentration and samadhi.* For Pure Land Patriarchs such as Tao-ch'o and Shan-tao, on the other hand, it refers to recitation with *utmost faith in Amitabha Buddha and the Pure Land.* Although the two concepts are in essence the same (one cannot recite with *utmost faith* without being in a state of concentration or samadhi), the distinction may be useful and expedient for beginning practitioners.

13. *Garden of Jeta and Anathapindika.* At the time of the Buddha's ministry, there was a wealthy merchant named Sudatta living in the kingdom of Sravasti. Because of his concern and generosity towards the less fortunate, he was given the epithet "Anathapindika" or "provider for widows and orphans". It once happened that having invited the Buddha to preach in Sravasti, Anathapindika set about trying to find a suitable place for the World-honored One and his company of 1,250 monks. Determining that the estate of Prince Jeta, son of King Prasenajit, with its grassy fields and leafy trees, would be ideal, he approached the prince and offered to buy it. The prince, startled, said in jest, "I am prepared to sell you as much land as you can cover with gold." Anathapindika remained silent for a moment, at which point the Prince laughed, "That

seems to be too much for you, does it not?" "Why, no," replied the merchant, "I was simply considering which of my storehouses to take the gold from ..." Thereupon, as the Prince watched in amazement, bullock cart after bullock cart arrived at his estate, and the workers laid a carpet of gold upon the land, stretching in all directions. *The only patches of ground which could not be covered were those where the trees stood.* Prince Jeta, realizing that the Buddha must be an exceptional man, then decided to donate these patches of land. In honor of the two benefactors, the estate was henceforth known as the Garden of Jeta and Anathapindika.

> Here the Buddha spent nineteen rainy seasons. This monastery where the Buddha spent the major part of his life was the place where he delivered many of his sermons (Narada Maha Thera, *The Buddha and His Teachings*, p. 93 and 94).

In Buddhist literature, the name of Anathapindika has become synonymous with selfless, extreme generosity in the cause of the Dharma (building temples, printing sutras and commentaries, etc.)

14. *Bodhi Mind*. See Glossary for this important term. Without the development of the Bodhi Mind, the Pure Land practitioner is in danger of seeking liberation for himself alone, without any thought of rescuing others. Though he may achieve a favorable rebirth in the human or celestial realms, he cannot be reborn in a Buddha-land such as Amitabha's Land.

15. See *Buddhism of Wisdom and Faith*, sect. 27, p. 114.

16. See Editors' foreword, p. ii. (2nd para.)

17. *Theravada vehicle.* This is an important point as the Theravada tradition is silent about the Mahayana pantheon in general and Amitabha Buddha and the Pure Land sages in particular.

18. This vivid description of the Pure Land of Amitabha Buddha is not unique in Mahayana Buddhism. The *Avatamsaka Sutra,* for example, contains many passages reflecting the same basic idea: the purification of a land by the merits and virtues of a great Bodhisattva.

> Great enlightening beings [Bodhisattvas] also dedicate the roots of goodness ... to the aspiration to purify all Buddha-lands ..., each of those lands adorned with arrays of pure exquisite treasures, as measureless as the cosmos – countless thrones of pure jewels spread with precious robes, countless jeweled curtains and jeweled nets draping, countless precious canopies with all kinds of jewels reflecting each other, countless jewel clouds raining jewels, countless jewel flowers all around, completely pure, countless pure arrays of balustrades made of jewels, countless jewel chimes always emitting the subtle tones of the Buddhas circulating throughout the cosmos, countless jewel lotuses of various jewel colors blooming with glorious radiance, countless jewel trees arrayed in rows all around, with flowers and fruits of innumerable jewels, countless jewel palaces with innumerable enlightening beings [Bodhisattvas] living in them, countless jewel mansions, spacious, magnificent, long and wide, far and near, countless jewel ramparts with exquisite jewel ornaments, countless jewel gates hung all around with strings of beautiful jewels ... (T. Cleary, *The Flower Ornament Scripture,*), Vol. One, p. 681).

19. The lotus flowers represent the Mind or Self-Nature; the essence of the Self-Nature (Mind) is ever quiescent but always luminous. Hence the image of lotus flowers shining with light.

20 *Kalavinka*: A bird whose singing is very melodious and which is first heard while still in the shell (possibly a kind of sparrow or Indian cuckoo). *Jivanjiva*: A two-headed bird, the heads representing mind and perception (possibly a kind of pheasant). (Hozen Seki.)

21. *Birds preaching the Dharma*. This can be understood as an allegory, similar to the traditional definition of a Pratyeka Buddha: a sage who becomes enlightened by observing the falling leaves and realizing, for example, the impermanence of life. It is in this sense that the falling leaves can be said to preach the Dharma (the Buddha's teachings).

The image of inanimate objects, such as the ground, the trees, the rain, precious stones, etc. expounding the Teaching is found throughout such high-level Mahayana texts as the *Avatamsaka Sutra*:

> Buddha's blessings and mystical powers
> Adorn everywhere with precious gemstones;
> The ground and the enlightenment tree
> Alternately emit light and sound expressing the truth.
>
> Precious lamps, infinite, rain from the sky,
> Studded with regal sapphires,
> All emitting subtle sounds speaking truth ... (T. Cleary, *The Flower Ornament Scripture*, Vol. One, p. 139).

22. This passages raises several questions pertinent to Pure Land teachings that require clarification:

a) *Singleminded recitation.* On the *everyday level*, this means focussing on Buddha Amitabha and Buddha Amitabha alone, to the exclusion of all other thoughts while reciting the Buddha's name. At a *deeper level*, the practitioner always focuses on Buddha Amitabha, be it during recitation sessions or outside of such sessions, when he is engaged in mundane activities – i.e., at all times.

b) *Singleminded recitation from one to seven days.* According to the *Amitabha Sutra*, to achieve rebirth in the Pure Land, it is necessary to recite the Buddha's name from one to seven days to the level of one-pointedness of mind (i.e., singleminded concentration). This, as any practitioner can attest, is an extremely difficult condition – one which very few cultivators can ever hope to fulfill. Therefore, in the *Meditation Sutra*, the Buddha taught an alternate way: *to recite the name of Amitabha Buddha with one-pointedness of mind, from one to ten times, at the time of death.* Please note, however, that this is a solution *in-extremis*, as at the time of death we are like turtles being skinned alive!

The crucial condition is one-pointedness of mind, which has been rendered variously as "with all one's heart", "without inversion", "with one Mind", "in all sincerity", etc. Unless the cultivator fulfills this condition, his mind will not be on the same wave length as that of Buddha Amitabha. Thus, he will not be in a position to take advantage of Amitabha Buddha's vows and achieve rebirth in the Pure Land.

c) *Cause and effect.* A question often raised is what happens to the law of cause and effect, the basis of all Buddhist teaching, when a sinner is reborn in the Pure Land thanks to reciting the Buddha's name?

On the *level of Mind (noumenon level)*, since all transgressions, worries and fears are born of delusion and ignorance, once we are enlightened (through rebirth in the Pure Land), all these transgressions, worries and fears are gone. This is as if, in the dark, we mistakenly take a rope for a snake. When we switch on the light and realize that it is only a rope, there is no longer worry or fear – nothing to change or repay, no remaining evil karma.

On the level of *everyday life (phenomenal level)*, good and evil karma do exist, but once we are enlightened and realize that nothing has intrinsic nature, evil karma and retribution no longer carry the heavy weight they do for ordinary beings. In fact, an enlightened person often uses such karma to help the very person he has wronged. For example, supposing there are two brothers playing a game of chance on the beach. The elder one, in a moment of greed, cheats on the younger one, who becomes angry and upset. Once their father convinces them that the game is only a make-believe, with no real gain or loss, the elder brother is awakened. He can then gladly accept his brother's anger and even turn around to help the younger one understand as well.

Another explanation of how a sinner can be reborn in the Pure Land is the *other-power* of Amitabha Buddha:

> A minute grain of sand, dropped on the surface of the water, will sink immediately. On the other hand, a block of stone, however large and heavy, can easily be moved from place to place by boat. The same is true of the Pure Land practitioner. However light his karma may be, if he is not rescued by Amitabha Buddha, he must revolve in the cycle of birth and death. With the help of the Buddha, his karma, however heavy, will not prevent his rebirth in the

Pure Land (*Questions of Ḳing Milindra*, in Thích Thiên Tâm, *Buddhism of Wisdom and Faith*, sect. 68 A).

23. See the following passage:

> On the subject of rebirth, [Zen Master Hsing An] stated, quoting the *Amitabha Sutra*: "the Sutra says 'You cannot hope to be reborn in the Pure Land with little merit and virtue and few causes and conditions or good roots.' Therefore, you should have numerous merits and virtues as well as good roots to qualify for rebirth in the Pure Land. However, *there is no better way to plant numerous good roots than to develop the Bodhi Mind, while the best way to achieve merits and virtues is to recite the name of Amitabha Buddha.* A moment of singleminded recitation surpasses years of practicing charity; truly developing the Bodhi Mind surpasses eons of cultivation. Holding firmly to these two causes and conditions assures rebirth in the Pure Land" (Thích Thiên Tâm, *Buddhism of Wisdom and Faith*, sect. 11).

The development of the Bodhi Mind (the aspiration for Enlightenment to benefit both self and others) is crucial in Pure Land Buddhism. Without this Bodhi Mind, the cultivator will not be fulfilling the ultimate intention of the Buddhas – to help all sentient beings become fully enlightened.

24. The treatise "Doubts and Questions about the Pure Land" by Master T'ien Ju is found in *Pure Land Buddhism: Dialogues with Ancient Masters* (Thich Thien Tam, tr.).

25. - *Ocean Seal Samadhi*. See Glossary.
    - *Great Perfect Wisdom Mirror*. This is a reference to the

all-seeing wisdom of the Buddhas, which is likened to an immense, round mirror as large as the universe.

26. The *Amitabha Sutra* belongs to the "self-spoken division" of the Tripitaka (Buddhist canon):

> Because its principles were too profound and wonderful for the Sravakas or Bodhisattvas to comprehend, no one requested the Pure Land Dharma-door. Nonetheless, it had to be revealed and so the Buddha spontaneously spoke this very important sutra, doubly important because it will be the last to disappear in the Dharma-ending age (Master Hsuan Hua, *A General Explanation of the Buddha Speaks of Amitabha Sutra* [the *Amitabha Sutra*], p. 1).

The *Brahma Net Sutra* (which contains the lofty Bodhisattva precepts) and the *Avatamsaka Sutra* (the Mahayana sutra *par excellence*) are the only other well-known examples of *self-spoken sutras*.

27. Please note that the Sutra uses the word "virtues", not "merits". See Glossary, "merit and Virtue".

28. This passage reflects the concept "one in all, all in one", expressing the essential unity of all things, a major tenet of the Avatamsaka school.

29. *Horizontal transcendence (escape).* "Horizontal" and "vertical" are figures of speech, which can readily be understood through the following example. Suppose we have a worm, born inside a stalk of bamboo. To escape, it can take the hard way and crawl "vertically" all the way to the top of the stalk. Alternatively, it can poke a hole near its current location and escape "horizontally" into the big, wide world.

The horizontal escape, for sentient beings, is to seek rebirth in the Pure Land of Amitabha Buddha.

30. *Life provisions*. See the following passage:

> Faith, Vows and Practice are called the "three provisions" of the Pure Land method. Just as travellers embarking on a distant journey must make provisions for medicine, food, clothing and funds sufficient to cover their needs en route, so, too, Pure Land practitioners require Faith to make firm Vows. However, Faith and Vows are hollow without Practice. Likewise, even if Practice is adequate, without Faith and Vows, that Practice will go astray, lacking criteria and direction. Therefore, Faith, Vows and Practice are the "provisions" of those returning to the Pure Land from afar (Thích Thiên Tâm, *Buddhism of Wisdom and Faith*,sect. 21).

31. These vows of Master Ou-i are well-known among Pure Land Buddhists and reflect the essence of Mahayana practice.

32. Full title of Chapter 40: *On Entering the Inconceivable State of Liberation through the Practices and Vows of the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra.* See Glossary, "Avatamsaka Sutra".

33. *Eight Divisions*: Includes gods, dragons, yaksas (ghosts or demons), asuras, garudas, kinnaras and mahoragas.

34. *Bodhi Mind*: See Glossary, this term and "Awakening vs. Enlightenment".

35. Among the various offerings to the Buddhas, *the offering of the Dharma* is the highest because it enables the practitioner to transcend Birth and Death and, ultimately, attain Buddhahood. The offering of the Dharma is explained in the third Vow as:

practicing according to Dharma, benefitting all sentient beings, never abandoning the Bodhi Mind ...

36. *Important point*: Each of the ten Vows of the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra is put into practice without interruption, in thought after thought, with body, speech and mind. Thus, the three karmas of body, speech and mind of the practitioner are pure, empty and still. In his lifetime, he has sown the seeds of rebirth in a pure realm. At the time of death, he will naturally be reborn in such a realm, of which the most representative is the Pure Land of Amitabha Buddha. This is a good illustration of the Pure Land/Zen teaching, "if the mind is pure, the land is pure".

37. This is a popular Pure Land image indicating that a person has transcended birth and death -- the common fate of all sentient beings in samsara.

38. *Lions Among Men, Lights of the Worlds, Lights of the Future*: metaphors for the Buddhas.

39. *Turn the Dharma wheel*: preach the Buddhas' teachings.

40. *Important point*: the *ultimate* goal of all Mahayana Buddhist practice is to lead the practitioner toward Buddhahood. Any other goals are either secondary or just temporary expedients.

41. *Demon states*: See Glossary, under "Demons".

42. & 43. These stanzas express a key concept in the *Avatamsaka Sutra* -- *unimpeded interpenetration of phenomena* (one mote of dust contains a multitude of worlds) and *unimpeded interpenetration of space and time* (one hairtip contains the past, present and future).

44. *Compress all eons:* The advanced practitioner always has his mind under control and dwells only in the present, without thinking of the past or the future. He is said to have compressed the three periods of time – past, present and future.

45. *Manjusri*: represents the perfection of wisdom, the wisdom of the Buddhas.

46. This stanza is very well-known in Mahayana Buddhism and has been incorporated into the daily liturgy.

47. To have faith in the Vows of Samantabhadra is to sow the seeds of Enlightenment. These *unconditioned* (transcendental) merits and virtues lead to Buddhahood. They are therefore superior to mundane offerings (even gold and jewels) as such offerings can bring only *conditioned* (temporal) merits and virtues, leading to a favorable rebirth in the human or celestial realms -- *not Buddhahood.*

48. *Fields of merits*: Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Arhats and all sentient beings, whether friends or foes, are fields of merits for the cultivator because they provide him with an opportunity to cultivate merits and virtues. For example, needy people provide the opportunity for the cultivator to practice charity. Thus, they are fields of merits for him. As this text states, "Bodhi belongs to living beings. Without living beings, no Bodhisattva could achieve Supreme, Perfect Enlightenment."

49. Anyone who reads, recites, accepts and explains Samantabhadra's vows sows the seeds of Buddhahood and ultimately becomes a Buddha. His rewards are therefore of an unconditioned nature (without outflows) and beyond the Triple Realm – beyond the knowledge and vision of all, except for the Buddhas.

Although he knows that Buddha lands
Are void like living beings
He goes on practicing the Pure Land
(Dharma) to teach and convert men.

Bodhisattva's practice
Vimalakirti Sutra

Glossary

(January 1997)

Amitabha (Amida, Amita, Amitayus). Amitabha is the most commonly used name for the Buddha of Infinite Light and Infinite Life. A transhistorical Buddha venerated by all Mahayana schools (T'ien T'ai, Esoteric, Zen, etc.) and, particularly, Pure Land. Presides over the Western Pure Land (Land of Ultimate Bliss), where anyone can be reborn through utterly sincere recitation of His name, particularly at the time of death.

Amitabha Buddha at the highest or noumenon level represents the True Mind, the Self-Nature common to the Buddhas and sentient beings -- all-encompassing and all-inclusive. This deeper understanding provides the rationale for the harmonization of Zen and Pure Land, two of the most popular schools of Mahayana Buddhism. See also "Buddha Recitation," "Mind," Pure Land."

Amitabha Sutra. See "Three Pure Land Sutras."

Arhat. Arhatship is the highest rank attained by Sravakas. An Arhat is a Buddhist saint who has attained liberation from the cycle of Birth and Death, generally through living a monastic life in accordance with the Buddhas' teachings. This is the goal of Theravadin practice, as contrasted with Bodhisattvahood in Mahayana practice. (*A Dictionary of Buddhism.*) See also "Sravakas."

Attachment. In the Four Noble truths, Buddha Shakyamuni taught that attachment to self is the root cause of suffering:

> From craving [attachment] springs grief, from craving springs fear; For him who is wholly free from craving, there is no grief, much less fear. (*Dhammapada Sutra*. In Narada Maha Thera, *The Buddha and His Teachings*.)
>
> If you don't have attachments, naturally you're liberated ... In ancient times, there was an old cultivator who asked for instructions from a monk, "Great Monk, let me ask you, how can I attain liberation?" The Great monk said, "Who tied you up?" This old cultivator answered, "Nobody tied me up." The monk said, "Then [you are liberated!]" (Hsuan Hua, tr., *Flower Adornment Sutra*, "Pure Conduct," chap. 11.)

For the seasoned practitioner, even the Dharma must not become an attachment. As an analogy, to clean one's shirt, it is necessary to use soap. However, if the soap is not then rinsed out, the garment will not be truly clean. Similarly, the practitioner's mind will not be fully liberated until he severs attachment to everything, including the Dharma itself.

Avalokitesvara. Also called Kuan Yin, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. Usually recognizable by the small Buddha adorning Her crown.

Avatamsaka (Flower Ornament) Sutra. The basic text of the Avatamsaka School. It is one of the longest sutras in the Buddhist Canon and records the highest teaching of Buddha Shakyamuni, immediately after Enlightenment. It is traditionally believed that the Sutra was taught to the Bodhisattvas and other high spiritual beings while the Buddha was in samadhi. The Sutra has been described as the "epitome of Buddhist thought, Buddhist sentiment and Buddhist experience" and is quoted by all schools of Mahayana Buddhism, in particular, Pure Land and Zen.

Awakening vs. Enlightenment. A clear distinction should be made between *awakening to the Way* (Great Awakening) and *attaining the Way* (attaining Enlightenment). (Note: There are many degrees of Awakening and Enlightenment. Attaining the Enlightenment of the Arhats, Pratyeka Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, etc. is different from attaining *Supreme Enlightenment*, i.e., Buddhahood.)

To experience a Great Awakening is to achieve (through Zen meditation, Buddha Recitation, etc.) a complete and deep realization of what it means to be a Buddha and how to reach Buddhahood. It is to see one's Nature, comprehend the True Nature of things, the Truth. However, only after becoming a Buddha can one be said to have truly attained Supreme Enlightenment (attained the Way). A metaphor appearing in the sutras is that of a glass of water containing sediment. As long as the glass is undisturbed, the sediment remains at the bottom and the water is clear. However, as soon as the glass is shaken, the water becomes turbid. Likewise, when a practitioner experiences a Great Awakening (awakens to the Way), his afflictions (greed, anger and delusion) are temporarily suppressed but not yet eliminated. To achieve Supreme Enlightenment (i.e., to be rid of all afflictions, to discard the sediment) is the ultimate goal. Only then can he completely trust his mind and actions. Before then, he should adhere to the precepts, keep a close watch on his mind and thoughts, like a cat stalking a mouse, ready to pounce on evil thoughts as soon as they arise. To do otherwise is to court certain failure, as stories upon stories of overconfident monks, roshis and gurus demonstrate.

Awakening of the Faith (Treatise). A major commentary by the Patriarch Asvaghosha (1st/2nd cent.), which presents the fundamental principles of Mahayana Buddhism. Several translations exist in English.

Bodhi. Sanskrit for Enlightenment.

Bodhi Mind, (Bodhicitta, Great Mind). The spirit of Enlightenment, the aspiration to achieve it, the Mind set on Enlightenment. It involves two parallel aspects: i) the determination to achieve Buddhahood and ii) the aspiration to rescue all sentient beings.

Bodhisattvas (Enlightening Beings). Those who aspire to Supreme Enlightenment and Buddhahood for themselves and all beings. The word Bodhisattva can therefore stand for a realized being such as Avalokitesvara or Samantabhadra but also for anyone who has developed the Bodhi Mind, the aspiration to save oneself and others.

Brahma Net Sutra (Brahmajala Sutra). This is a sutra of major significance in Mahayana Buddhism. In addition to containing the ten major precepts of Mahayana (not to kill, steal, lie, etc.) the Sutra also contains forty-eight less important injunctions. These fifty-eight major and minor precepts constitute the Bodhisattva Precepts, taken by most Mahayana monks and nuns and certain advanced lay practitioners.

Buddha Nature. The following terms refer to the same thing: Self-Nature, True Nature, Original Nature, Dharma Nature, True Mark, True Mind, True Emptiness, True Thusness, Dharma Body, Original Face, Emptiness, Prajna, Nirvana.

> According to the Mahayana view, [Buddha-nature] is the true, immutable, and eternal nature of all beings. Since all beings possess Buddha-nature, it is possible for them to attain enlightenment and become a Buddha, regardless of what level of existence they occupy ... The answer to the question whether Buddha-nature is immanent in beings is an essential determining factor for the association of a given school with Theravada or Mahayana, the two great currents within Buddhism. In Theravada this notion is unknown; here the potential to become a Buddha is not ascribed to every being. By contrast the Mahayana sees the attainment of Buddhahood as the highest goal; it can be attained through the inherent Buddha-nature of every being through appropriate spiritual practice. (*Shambhala Dictionary of Buddhism and Zen.*) See also "Dharma Nature."

Buddha Recitation. General term for a number of practices, such as i) oral recitation of Amitabha Buddha's name and ii) visualization/contemplation of His auspicious marks and those of the Pure Land.

> In reciting the buddha-name you use your own mind to be mindful of your own true self: how could this be considered seeking outside yourself?
>
> Reciting the buddha-name proceeds from the mind. The mind remembers Buddha and does not forget. That's why it is called buddha remembrance, or reciting the buddha-name mindfully.

The most common Pure Land technique is recitation of Amitabha Buddha's name. See also "Amitabha," "Pure Land."

Buddha-Remembrance. A synonym for Buddha Recitation in the general sense.

Conditioned (compounded). Describes all the various phenomena in the world -- made up of separate, discrete elements, "with outflows," with no intrinsic nature of their own. Conditioned merits and virtues lead to rebirth within samsara, whereas unconditioned merits and virtues are the causes of liberation from Birth and Death. See also "Unconditioned."

Dedication of Merit. See "Transference of Merit."

Delusion (Ignorance). "Delusion refers to belief in something that contradicts reality. In Buddhism, delusion is ... a lack of awareness of the true nature or Buddha nature of things, or of the true meaning of existence. "According to the Buddhist outlook, we are deluded by our senses -- among which intellect (discriminating, discursive thought) is included as a sixth sense. Consciousness, attached to the senses, leads us into error by causing us to take the world of appearances for the world of reality, whereas in fact it is only a limited and fleeting aspect of reality." (*Shambhala Dictionary of Buddhism and Zen.*)

According to Mahayana teaching, there are, in total, 52 levels of delusion, in ascending order of subtlety.

Delusions of Views and Thought. Delusion of views refers to lust and greed for externals (clothing, food, sleep, etc.), which are viewed as real rather than empty in their true nature.

> The delusion of thought consists in being confused about principles and giving rise to discrimination .. Thought delusions are unclear, muddled thoughts, taking what is wrong as right, and what is right as wrong (Master hsuan Hua).

Demons. Evil influences which hinder cultivation. These can take an infinite number of forms, including evil beings or hallucinations. Disease and death, as well as the three poisons of greed, anger and delusion are also equated to demons, as they disturb the mind.

The *Nirvana Sutra* lists four types of demon: i) greed, anger and delusion; ii) the five skandas, or obstructions caused by physical and mental functions; iii) death; iv) the demon of the Sixth Heaven (Realm of Desire).

The Self-Nature has been described in Mahayana sutras as a house full of gold and jewelry. To preserve the riches, i.e., to keep the mind calm, empty and still, we should shut the doors to the three thieves of greed, anger and delusion. Letting the mind wander opens the house to "demons," that is, hallucinations and harm. Thus, Zen practitioners are taught that, while in meditation, "Encountering demons, kill the demons, encountering Buddhas, kill the Buddhas." Both demons and Buddhas are mind-made, Mind-Only.

For a detailed discussion of demons, see Master Thích Thiên Tâm, *Buddhism of Wisdom and Faith*, sect. 51.

Devas. Deities, gods.

Dharma. a) The teachings of the Buddhas (generally capitalized in English); b) duty, law, doctrine; c) things, events, phenomena, everything.

Dharma-Ending Age, Degenerate Age, Last Age. The present spiritually degenerate era, twenty-six centuries after the demise of Shakyamuni Buddha. The concept of decline, dissension and schism within the Dharma after the passing of the Buddha is a general teaching of Buddhism and a corollary to the Truth of Impermanence. See, for example, the *Diamond Sutra* (sect. 6 in the translation by A.F. Price and Wong Mou-lam). The time following Buddha Shakyamuni's demise is divided into three periods: i) the *Perfect Age of the Dharma*, lasting 500 years, when the Buddha's teaching (usually meditation) was correctly practiced and Enlightenment often attained; ii) the *Dharma Semblance Age*, lasting about 1,000 years, when a form of the teaching was practiced but Enlightenment seldom attained; iii) the *Dharma-Ending Age*, lasting some ten thousand years, when a diluted form of the teaching exists and Enlightenment is rarely attained.

Dharma Gate. School, method, tradition.

Dharma Nature. The intrinsic nature of all things. Used interchangeably with "emptiness," "reality." See also "Buddha Nature."

Dharmakara. The Bodhisattva who later became Amitabha Buddha, as related in the *Longer Amitabha Sutra*. The Bodhisattva Dharmakara is famous for forty-eight Vows, particularly the eighteenth, which promises rebirth in the Pure Land to anyone who recites His name with utmost sincerity and faith at the time of death.

Diamond Sutra. "An independent part of the *Prajnaparamita Sutra*, which attained great importance, particularly in East Asia. It shows that all phenomenal appearances are not ultimate reality but rather illusions, projections of one's own mind ... The work is called *Diamond Sutra* because it is 'sharp like a diamond that cuts away all unnecessary conceptualizations and brings one to the further shore of enlightenment.'" (*Shambhala Dictionary of Buddhism and Zen.*)

Difficult Path of Practice (Path of the Sages, Self-Power Path). According to Pure Land teaching, all conventional Buddhist ways of practice and cultivation (Zen, Theravada, the Vinaya School, etc.), which emphasize self-power and self-reliance. This is contrasted to the Easy Path of Practice, that is, the Pure Land method, which relies on both self-power and other-power (the power and assistance of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas).

Dusts (Worldly Dusts). A metaphor for all the mundane things that can cloud our bright Self-Nature. These include form, sound, scent, taste, touch, dharmas (external opinions and views). These dusts correspond to the five senses and the discriminating, everyday mind (the sixth sense, in Buddhism).

Easy Path of Practice. Refers to Pure Land practice. The Easy Path involves reliance on the power of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, in particular Buddha Amitabha ("other-power") in addition to one's own cultivation("self-power"). Usually contrasted with primary reliance on self-power (Difficult Path of Practice), taught in other Buddhist schools. Equal reliance on self-power and other-power distinguishes the Pure Land School from most other schools of Buddhism. The distinction is, however, a matter of emphasis, as all schools of Buddhism rely, to a greater or lesser extent, on both self-power and other-power. See also "Other-power".

Endurance (World). See "Saha World."

Enlightenment. See "Awakening vs. Enlightenment."

Evil Paths (Evil planes of existence). The paths of hells, hungry ghosts, animality. These paths can be taken as states of mind; i.e., when someone has a vicious thought of maiming or killing another, he is effectively reborn, *for that moment*, in the hells.

Expedient means (Skillful means, Skill-in-means, Upaya). Refers to strategies, methods, devices, targeted to the capacities, circumstances, likes and dislikes of each sentient being, so as to rescue him and lead him to Enlightenment. "Thus, all particular formulations of the Teaching are just provisional expedients to communicate the Truth (Dharma) in specific contexts." (J.C. Cleary.) "The Buddha's words were medicines for a given sickness at a given time," always infinitely adaptable to the conditions of the audience.

Externalists. Literally, followers of non-Buddhist paths. This term is used by Buddhists with reference to followers of other religions.

Five Corruptions. See "Five Turbidities."

Five Desires (Five Sensual Pleasures). Desires connected with the five senses, i.e., form, sound, aroma, taste and touch.

Five Periods and Eight Teachings. All the teachings of Buddha Sakyamuni during His lifetime, as categorized by the T'ien-t'ai school.

Five Precepts. The precepts taken by lay Buddhists, prohibiting i) killing, ii) stealing iii) lying, iv) sexual misconduct, v) ingesting intoxicants. See also "Ten Precepts."

Five Turbidities (Corruptions, Defilements, Depravities, Filths, Impurities). They are: 1. the defilement (corruption) of views, when incorrect, perverse thoughts and ideas are predominant; 2. the defilement of passions, when all kinds of transgressions are exalted; 3. the defilement of the human condition, when people are usually dissatisfied and unhappy; 4. the defilement of the life-span, when the human life-span as a whole decreases; 5. the defilement of the age, when war and natural disasters abound. These conditions, viewed from a Buddhist angle, can constitute aids to Enlightenment, as they may spur practitioners to more earnest cultivation.

Flower Store World. The entire cosmos, consisting of worlds upon worlds *ad infinitum*, as described in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. It is the realm of Vairocana Buddha, the transcendental aspect of Buddha Shakyamuni and of all Buddhas. The Saha World, the Western Pure Land and, for that matter, all lands and realms are within the Flower Store World.

Four Modes of Birth. Birth from the womb, from eggs, from moisture, and by transformation (as in the case of deities, etc.).

Four Pure Lands. A classification by the Pure Land and T'ien-t'ai schools of the pure realms subsumed under the Land of Amitabha Buddha, as described in the sutras. They are:

i) The Land of Common Residence of Beings and Saints (Land Where Saints and Ordinary Beings Dwell Together), where all beings, from the Six Planes of Existence (hells, hungry ghosts ...) to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, live together. (This Land of Common Residence is further divided into two, the Common Residence *Pure* Land and Common Residence *Impure* Land);
ii) The Land of Expediency (Land of Expedient Liberation), inhabited by Arhats and Pratyeka Buddhas;
iii) The Land of Real Reward, inhabited by the great Bodhisattvas;
iv) The Land of Eternally Quiescent Light, in which the Buddhas dwell.

These distinctions are at the phenomenal level. At the noumenon level, there is, of course, no difference among them.

Good Spiritual Advisor. Guru, virtuous friend, wise person, Bodhisattva, Buddha – anyone (even an evil being!) who can help the practitioner progress along the path to Enlightenment. This notwithstanding, *wisdom* should be the primary factor in the selection of such an advisor: the advisor must have wisdom, and both advisor and practitioner must exercise wisdom in selecting one another. NOTE: An evil being can help us avoid certain transgressions by indirectly drawing our attention to the negative consequences of those actions.

Grades of Rebirth: See Lotus Grades

Great Awakening. See "Awakening vs. Enlightenment."

Heaven of the Thirty-Three. A heaven in the Realm of Desire, with thirty-two god-kings presided over by Indra, thus totaling thirty-three, located at the sumit of Mt. Sumeru (G.C.C. Chang).

Heretical views. The sutras usually refer to sixty-two such views. They were the externalist (non-Buddhist) views prevalent in Buddha Shakyamuni's time.

Ignorance: See "Delusion"

Jewel Net of Indra. This is a net said to hang in the palace of Indra, the king of the gods. At each interstice of the net is a reflecting jewel, which mirrors not only the adjacent jewels but the multiple images reflected in them. This famous image is meant to describe the unimpeded interpenetration of all and everything.

Karma. Action leading to future retribution or reward, in the current or future lifetimes.

Common karma: the difference between personal and common karma can be seen in the following example: Suppose a country goes to war to gain certain economic advantages and in the process, numerous soldiers and civilians are killed or maimed. If a particular citizen volunteers for military service and actually participates in the carnage, he commits a *personal* karma of killing. Other citizens, however, even if opposed to the war, may benefit directly or indirectly (e.g., through economic gain). They are thus said to share in their country's *common* karma of killing.

Fixed karma: in principle, all karma can be changed. Fixed karma, however, is karma which can only be changed in extraordinary circumstances, because it derives from an evil act committed simultaneously with mind, speech and body. An example of fixed karma would be a premeditated crime (versus a crime of passion).

Ksitigarbha. A major Bodhisattva, also referred to as Ti-tsang or Earth Store, who saves sentient beings in the Evil Realms, particularly the hells.

> [Usually] depicted as a monk. In his right hand is a metal staff with six jingling rings on it, which opens the gates of the hells for him. In the left hand he holds a wish-fulfilling jewel, the radiance of which illuminates the hells and calms the sufferings of the damned. Sometimes [Ksitigarbha] wears a crown of the type worn by Chinese monks during funeral ceremonies. Sometimes he is also depicted sitting on a lotus throne. (*Shambhala Dictionary of Buddhism and Zen.*)

Lankavatara Sutra. The only sutra recommended by Bodhidharma, the First Zen Patriarch in China. It is a key Zen text, along with the *Diamond Sutra* (recommended by the Sixth Patriarch), the *Surangama Sutra*, the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, the *Avatamsaka Sutra* ... The last four sutras are referred to frequently in Pure Land commentaries.

Last Age. See "Dharma-Ending Age."

Lesser Vehicle(s). The early Buddhism, the vehicle of Arhats and Pratyeka Buddhas. A term coined by Mahayanists to distinguish this school of Buddhism [whose modern descendent is Theravada] from Mahayana. It is so called because the teaching of this school puts emphasis on one's own liberation, whereas the teaching of Mahayana stresses the attainment of Buddhahood for all sentient beings. Theravada is now prevalent in southeast Asia, while Mahayana has spread over the northern area (China, Vietnam, Korea, Japan ...) (G.C.C. Chang).

Lotus Grades. The nine possible degrees of rebirth in the Western Pure Land. The more merits and virtues the practitioner accumulates, the higher the grade.

Lotus Sutra. A major Buddhist text and one of the most widely read sutras in the present day.

> One of the earliest and most richly descriptive of the Mahayana sutras of Indian origin. It became important for the shaping of the Buddhist tradition in East Asia, in particular because of its teaching of the One Vehicle under which are subsumed the usual Hinayana [Theravada] and Mahayana divisions. It is the main text of the Tendai [T'ien T'ai] school. (Joji Okazaki.)

This School has a historically close relationship with the Pure Land School. Thus, Master T'ai Hsu taught that the *Lotus Sutra* and the *Amitabha Sutras* were closely connected, differing only in length.

Lotus Treasury World. See "Ocean-Wide Lotus Assembly."

Mahasthamaprapta (Shih Chih, Seishi). One of the three sages in Pure Land Buddhism, recognizable by the water jar (jewelled pitcher) adorning Her crown. Usually represented in female form in East Asian iconography. Amitabha Buddha is frequently depicted standing between the Bodhisattvas Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta.

Marks. Characteristics, forms, physiognomy. Marks are contrasted with essence, in the same way that phenomena are contrasted with noumenon. *True Mark* stands for True Form, True Nature, Buddha Nature, always unchanging. The *True Mark* of all phenomena is like space: always existing but really empty; although empty, really existing. The *True Mark* of the Triple World is No-Birth/No-Death, not existent/not non-existent, not like this/not like that. *True Mark* is also called "Self-Nature," "Dharma Body," the "Unconditioned," "True Thusness," "Nirvana," "Dharma Realm." See also "Noumenon/Phenomena."

Meditation Sutra. One of the three core sutras of the Pure Land school. It teaches sixteen methods of visualizing Amitabha Buddha, the Bodhisattvas and the Pure Land. This sutra stresses the element of meditation in Pure Land. See also "Three Pure Land Sutras," "Vaidehi," "Visualization."

Merit and Virtue. These two terms are sometimes used interchangeably. However, there is a crucial difference: *merits* are the blessings (wealth, intelligence, etc.) of the human and celestial realms; therefore, they are temporary and subject to Birth and Death. *Virtues*, on the other hand, transcend Birth and Death and lead to Buddhahood. An identical action (e.g., charity) can lead either to merit or virtue, depending on the mind of the practitioner, that is, on whether he is seeking mundane rewards (merit) or transcendence (virtue). For example, if a donor were to fund a university chair or a hospital wing seeking to perpetuate his name, he would receive merits in future lifetimes; however, if he were to do so with the intention of practicing relinquishment and non-attachment, he would be accumulating virtues, i.e., he would be a step closer to Enlightenment. Such virtues are transcendental, as contrasted with merits, which are "conditioned", that is, within the realm of Birth and Death. This distinction is crucial to the understanding of apparent hyperbole in Mahayana texts such as the *Diamond* and *Avatamsaka* Sutras. Thus, the Pure Land cultivator should not seek merits for by doing so, he would, in effect, be choosing to remain within samsara. This would be counter to his very wish to escape Birth and Death.

Mind. Key concept in all Buddhist teaching.

> Frequent term in Zen, used in two senses: (1) the mind-ground, the One Mind ... the buddha-mind, the mind of thusness ... (2) false mind, the ordinary mind dominated by conditioning, desire, aversion, ignorance, and false sense of self, the mind of delusion ... (J.C. Cleary, *A Buddha from Korea*.)

The ordinary, deluded mind (thought) includes feelings, impressions, conceptions, consciousness, etc. The Self-Nature True Mind is the fundamental nature, the Original Face, reality, etc. As an analogy, the Self-Nature True Mind is to mind what water is to waves -- the two cannot be dissociated. They are the same but they are also different. To approach the sutras "making discriminations and nurturing attachments" is no different from the Zen allegory of a person attempting to lift a chair while seated on it. If he would only get off the chair, he could raise it easily. Similarly, the practitioner truly understands the Dharma only to the extent that he "suspends the operation of the discriminating intellect, the faculty of the internal dialogue through which people from moment to moment define and perpetuate their customary world of perception."

See also the following passage:

> The mind ... "creates" the world in the sense that it invests the phenomenal world with value. The remedy to this situation, according to Buddhism, is to still the mind, to stop it from making discriminations and nurturing attachments toward certain phenomena and feelings of aversion toward others. When this state of calmness of mind is achieved, the darkness of ignorance and passion will be dispelled and the mind can perceive the underlying unity of the absolute. The individual will then have achieved the state of enlightenment and will be freed from the cycle of birth and death, because such a person is now totally indifferent to them both. (Burton Watson, *The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-Chi.*)

Mindfulness of the Buddha. Synonymous with Buddha Recitation. See "Buddha Recitation."

Nagarjuna. (2nd/3rd cent.) "One of the most important philosophers of Buddhism and the founder of the Madhyamika school. Nagarjuna's major accomplishment was his systematization ... of the teaching presented in the *Prajnaparamita Sutras*. Nagarjuna's methodological approach of rejecting all opposites is the basis of the Middle Way ..." (*Shambhala Dictionary of Buddhism and Zen.*)

Non-Birth (No-Birth). "A term used to describe the nature of Nirvana. In Mahayana Buddhism generally, No-Birth signifies the 'extinction' of the discursive thinking by which we conceive of things as arising and perishing, forming attachments to them." (Ryukoku University.) See also "Tolerance of Non-Birth."

Ocean Seal Samadhi. A state of concentration of the highest level, mentioned, *among other places*, in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. The mind is likened to the ocean, which when calm and without a single wave, can reflect everything throughout the cosmos, past, present and future.

Ocean-Wide Lotus Assembly. The Lotus Assembly represents the gathering of Buddha Amitabha, the Bodhisattvas, the sages and saints and all other superior beings in the Land of Ultimate Bliss. This Assembly is "Ocean-Wide" as the participants are infinite in number – spreading as far and wide as the oceans of the cosmos. The term Ocean-Wide Assembly is generally associated with the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, a text particularly prized by the Pure Land and Zen schools alike.

Once-returner. A sage who has only one rebirth left before reaching Arhatship and escaping birth and death.

One-Life Bodhisattva. A Bodhisattva who is one lifetime away from Buddhahood. The best known example is the Bodhisattva Maitreya.

Other-Power. The issue of other-power (Buddhas' power) is often misunderstood and glossed over by many Buddhists. However, it must be pointed out that, in Buddhism, other-power is absolutely necessary if a Bodhisattva is to attain Ultimate Enlightenment. The *Lankavatara Sutra* (the only sutra recommended by Bodhidharma) and the *Avatamsaka Sutra* (described by D.T. Suzuki as the epitome of Buddhist thought) are emphatically clear on this point:

> As long as [conversion] is an experience and not mere understanding, it is evident that self-discipline plays an important role in the Buddhist life ... but ... we must not forget the fact that the Lanka [Lankavatara Sutra] also emphasizes the necessity of the Buddhas' power being added to the Bodhisattvas', in their upward course of spiritual development and in the accomplishment of their great task of world salvation. (Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, tr., *The Lankavatara Sutra*, p. xviii.)

The *Avatamsaka Sutra* states:

Having purified wisdom and means in the *seventh stage* ...
The great sages attain acceptance of non-origination ...
On the basis of their previous resolution, the buddhas further exhort them ...:
"Though you have extinguished the burning of the fire of affliction,
Having seen the world still afflicted, remember your past vows;
Having thought of the welfare of the world, work in quest
Of the cause of knowledge, for the liberation of the world."
(T. Cleary, tr., *The Flower Ornament Sutra*, Vol II, p. 86)
See also "Easy Path of Practice."

Paramita. Means "the perfection of" or "reaching the other shore" (Enlightenment) as contrasted with this shore of suffering and mortality. The paramitas are usually six in number (charity, discipline, forbearance, energy, concentration, wisdom) or expanded to ten (adding expedients, vows, power and knowledge). The Mahayana tradition emphasizes the paramita of expedients, or skill-in-means.

Polar Mountain (Mount Sumeru). In Buddhist cosmology, the universe is composed of worlds upon worlds, ad infinitum. (Our earth is only a small part of one of these worlds). The Polar Mountain is the central mountain of each world.

Pratyeka Buddhas. "These buddhas become fully enlightened ... by meditating on the principle of causality. Unlike the Perfect Buddhas, however, they do not exert themselves to teach others" (A. Buzo and T. Prince).

Pure Land. Generic term for the realms of the Buddhas. In this text it denotes the Land of Ultimate Bliss or Western Land of Amitabha Buddha. It is not a realm of enjoyment, but rather an *ideal place of cultivation*, beyond the Triple Realm and samsara, where those who are reborn are no longer subject to retrogression. This is the key distinction between the Western Pure Land and such realms as the Tusita Heaven. There are two conceptions of the Pure Land: as different and apart from the Saha World *and* as one with and the same as the Saha World. When the mind is pure and undefiled, any land or environment becomes a pure land (*Vimalakirti, Avatamsaka Sutras* ...). See also "Four Pure Lands", "Triple Realm."

Pure Land School. When Mahayana Buddhism spread to China, Pure Land ideas found fertile ground for development. In the fourth century, the movement crystallized with the formation of the Lotus Society, founded by Master Hui Yuan (334-416), the first Pure Land Patriarch. The school was formalized under the Patriarchs T'an Luán (Donran) and Shan Tao (Zendo). Master Shan Tao's teachings, in particular, greatly influenced the development of Japanese Pure Land, associated with Honen Shonin (Jodo school) and his disciple, Shinran Shonin (Jodo Shinshu school) in the 12th and 13th centuries. Jodo Shinshu, or Shin Buddhism, places overwhelming emphasis on the element of faith.

> [Pure Land comprises the schools] of East Asia which emphasize aspects of Mahayana Buddhism stressing faith in Amida, meditation on and recitation of his name, and the religious goal of being reborn in his "Pure Land" or "Western Paradise." (Keith Crim.)

Note: An early form of Buddha Recitation can be found in the *Nikayas* of the Pali Canon:

> In the *Nikayas*, the Buddha ... advised his disciples to think of him and his virtues as if they saw his body before their eyes, whereby they would be enabled to accumulate merit and attain Nirvana or be saved from transmigrating in the evil paths ... (D.T. Suzuki, *The Eastern Buddhist*, Vol. 3, No. 4, p. 317.)

Pure Land Sutras. See "Three Pure Land Sutras."

Saha World. World of Endurance. Refers to this world of ours, filled with suffering and afflictions, yet gladly endured by its inhabitants.

Samadhi. Meditative absorption. "Usually denotes the particular final stage of pure concentration." There are many degrees and types of samadhi (Buddha Recitation, Ocean Seal, Pratyutpanna, etc.)

Samantabhadra. Also called Universal Worthy or, in Japanese, Fugen. A major Bodhisattva, who personifies the transcendental practices and vows of the Buddhas (as compared to the Bodhisattva Manjusri, who represents transcendental wisdom). Usually depicted seated on an elephant with six tusks (six paramitas). Best known for his "Ten Great Vows."

Samatha-Vipasyana. "Tranquility and contemplation; stopping evil thoughts and meditating on the truth." (Hisao Inagaki.)

Samsara. Cycle of rebirths; realms of Birth and Death.

Sariputra. Major disciple of Shakyamuni Buddha, foremost in wisdom among His Arhat disciples.

Scriptural Buddhism. Buddhism as explained in the Buddhist canon, that is, all schools of Buddhism except Zen. The term applies, in general, to such traditions as T'ien-t'ai, Avatamsaka and Pure Land.

Self-Power. See "Difficult Path of Practice."

Sentient Being. Sentient beings include hell beings, heavenly beings, ghosts, animals, and humans, but not rocks and plants. Since deities and spirits may live in association with plants, plants may react to stimuli, but in the early tradition, they do not have consciousness. (K.L. Tsomo)

Seven Treasures. Gold, silver, lapis lazuli, crystal, agate, red pearl and carnelian. They represent the seven powers of faith, perseverance, sense of shame, avoidance of wrongdoing, mindfulness, concentration and wisdom.

Singleminded recitation. Recitation completely focussed on the name of Amitabha Buddha without any distracting thoughts. The concept is sometimes rendered as "one-pointedness of mind" or "One Mind". This is a *sine qua non* for rebirth in the Pure Land.

Six Directions. North, South, East, West, above and below, i.e., all directions. In the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, they are expanded to include points of the compass in between and are referred to as the Ten Directions.

Six Dusts. See "Dusts."

Six Planes of Existence (Six Paths). The paths within the realm of Birth and Death. Includes the three Evil Paths (hells, hungry ghosts, animality) and the paths of humans, asuras and celestials. These paths can be understood as states of mind. See also "Evil Paths."

Sixth Patriarch. Hui Neng (638-713), the Sixth Patriarch of the Chinese Zen school and author of the *Platform Sutra*.

Skillful Means. See "Expedient Means."

Spiritual power. Also called miraculous power. Includes, *inter alia*, the ability to see all forms (deva eye), to hear all sounds (deva ear), to know the thoughts of others, to be anywhere and do anything at will.

Sravakas. "Lit., 'voice-hearers': those who follow [Theravada] and eventually become arhats as a result of listening to the buddhas and following their teachings" (A. Buzo and T. Prince.) See also "Arhat."

Sudden Perfect Teaching. Term used in the T'ien-t'ai school to describe its teachings, which are complete (Perfect) and lead to the swift attainment of Buddhahood (Sudden). The term "Perfect Teaching" also refers to the suptreme teaching of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*.

Sudhana (Good Wealth). The protagonist in the next-to-last and longest chapter of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. Seeking Enlightenment, he visited and studied with fifty-three spiritual advisors and became the equal of the Buddhas in one lifetime. Both his first advisor (Mansjuri) and his last advisor (Samantabhadra) taught him the Pure Land path.

Surangama Sutra. Also called *Heroic Gate Sutra.*

> The "Sutra of the Heroic One" exercised a great influence on the development of Mahayana Buddhism in China [and neighboring countries]. It emphasizes the power of samadhi, through which enlightenment can be attained, and explains the various methods of emptiness meditation through the practice of which everyone ... can realize ... enlightenment.

(*Shambhala Dictionary of Buddhism and Zen.*)

Tathagata. Usually translated as "Thus Come One."

> He who came as did all Buddhas, who took the absolute way of cause and effect, and attained to perfect wisdom; one of the highest titles of a Buddha (Charles Luk).

Ten Directions. See "Six Directions."

Ten Evil Acts (Ten Evil Deeds, Ten Sins). 1. Killing; 2. stealing; 3. sexual misconduct; 4. lying; 5. slander; 6. coarse language; 7. empty chatter; 8. covetousness; 9. angry speech; 10. wrong views. See also "Ten Precepts."

Ten Great Vows. The famous vows of the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. These vows represent the quintessence of this Sutra and are the basis of all Mahayana practice. Studying the vows and putting them into practice is tantamount to studying the *Avatamsaka Sutra* and practicing its teachings. See also "Samantabhadra."

Ten Precepts (Ten Virtues, Ten Good Deeds). Include an expanded version of the Five Precepts of body and mouth (not to kill, steal, engage in illicit sex, lie, or take intoxicants) with the addition of the virtues of the mind (elimination of greed, anger and delusion). See also "Five Precepts," "Ten Evil Acts."

Third Lifetime. In the first lifetime, the practitioner engages in mundane good deeds which bring ephemeral worldly blessings (wealth, power, authority, etc.) in the second lifetime. Since power tends to corrupt, he is likely to create evil karma, resulting in retribution in the third lifetime. Thus, good deeds in the first lifetime are potential "enemies" of the third lifetime. To ensure that mundane good deeds do not become "enemies," the practitioner should dedicate all merits to a transcendental goal, i.e., to become Bodhisattvas or Buddhas or, in Pure Land teaching, to achieve rebirth in the Pure Land – a Buddha land beyond Birth and Death.

In a mundane context, these three lifetimes can be conceived of as three generations. Thus, the patriarch of a prominent family, through work and luck, amasses great power, fortune and influence (first lifetime). His children are then able to enjoy a leisurely, and, too often, dissipated life (second lifetime). By the generation of the grandchildren, the family's fortune and good reputation have all but disappeared (third lifetime).

Thirty-seven Limbs of Enlightenment. These are: a. the four mindfulnesses; b. the four right efforts; c. the four bases of miraculous powers; d. the five roots; e. the five powers; f. the seven factors of enlightenment; and g. the eightfold noble path (G.C.C. Chang).

Three bodies of the Buddhas (Skt. Trikaya). 1. *Dharmakaya*: The Dharma-body, or the "body of reality", which is formless, unchanging, transcendental, and inconceivable. Synonymous with suchness, or emptiness. 2. *Sambhogakaya:* the "body of enjoyment", the celestial body of the Buddha. Personification of eternal perfection in its ultimate sense. It "resides" in the Pure Land and never manifests itself in the mundane world, but only in the celestial spheres, accompanied by enlightened Bodhisattvas. 3. *Nirmanakaya*: the "incarnated body" of the Buddha. In order to benefit certain sentient beings, a Buddha incarnates himself into an appropriate visible body, such as that of Sakyamuni Buddha.

The incarnated body of the Buddha should not be confused with a magically produced Buddha. The former is a real, tangible human body which has a definite life span, The latter is an illusory Buddha-form which is produced with miraculous powers and can be withdrawn with miraculous powers (G.C.C. Chang).

Three Evil Paths. See "Evil Paths."

Three Pure Land Sutras. Pure Land Buddhism is based on three basic sutras:

a) *Amitabha Sutra* (or *Shorter Amitabha Sutra*, or *Smaller Sukhavati-Vyuha*, or the *Sutra of Amida*);

b) *Longer Amitabha Sutra* (or *Longer Sukhavati-Vyuha*, or the *Teaching of Infinite Life*);

c) *Meditation Sutra* (or the *Meditation on the Buddha of Infinite Life*, or the *Amitayur Dhyana Sutra*).

Sometimes the last chapter of the *Avatamsaka Sutra* ("The Practices and Vows of the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra") is considered the fourth basic sutra of the Pure Land tradition. Note: According to the renowned Master T'ai-hsu and others, the *Longer Amitabha Sutra* is a shorter form of the *Lotus Sutra*.

Three Treasures (Triple Jewel) The Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha (community of monks).

T'ien T'ai (Tendai) School. A major school that takes the *Lotus Sutra* as its principal text. Historically, it has had a close relationship with Pure Land. See also "Lotus Sutra."

Tolerance of Non-Birth. "Tolerance" (insight) that comes from the knowledge that all phenomena are unborn. Sometimes translated as "insight into the non-origination of all existence/non-origination of the dharmas."

> A Mahayana Buddhist term for the insight into emptiness, the non-origination or birthlessness of things or beings realized by Bodhisattvas who have attained the eighth Stage [Ground] of the path to Buddhahood. When a Bodhisattva realizes this insight he has attained the stage of non-retrogression. (Ryukoku University.)

The Pure Land School teaches that anyone reborn in the Pure Land attains the Tolerance of Non-Birth and reaches the stage of non-retrogression, never to fall back into samsara. See also "Non-Birth."

Transference of Merit. The concept of merit transference, or sharing one's own merits and virtues with others, is reflected in the following passage:

> Some of us may ask whether the effect of [evil] karma can be ... [changed] by repeating the name of Kuan-Yin. This question is tied up with that of rebirth in Sukhavati [the Pure Land] and it may be answered by saying that

> invocation of Kuan-Yin's name forms another cause which will right away offset the previous karma. We know, for example, that if there is a dark, heavy cloud above, the chances are that it will rain. But we also know that if a strong wind should blow, the cloud will be carried away somewhere else and we will not feel the rain. Similarly, the addition of one big factor can alter the whole course of karma ...
>
> It is only by accepting the idea of life as one whole that both Theravadins and Mahayanists can advocate the practice of transference of merit to others. With the case of Kuan-Yin then, by calling on Her name we identify ourselves with Her and as a result of this identification, Her merits flow over to us. These merits which are now ours then counterbalance our bad karma and save us from calamity. The law of cause and effect still stands good. All that has happened is that a powerful and immensely good karma has overshadowed the weaker one. (Lecture on Kuan-Yin by Tech Eng Soon - Penang Buddhist Association, c. 1960. Pamphlet.)

Triple Jewel. See "Three Treasures."

Triple Realm (Three Realms, Three Worlds). The realms of *desire* (our world), *form* (realms of the lesser deities) and *formlessness* (realms of the higher deities). The Western Pure Land is outside the Triple Realm, beyond samsara and retrogression. See also "Pure Land."

Two Truths. 1) *Relative* or conventional, everyday truth of the mundane world subject to delusion and dichotomies and 2) the *Ultimate* Truth, transcending dichotomies, as taught by the Buddhas.

> According to Buddhism, there are two kinds of Truth, the Absolute and the Relative. The Absolute Truth (of the Void) manifests "illumination but is always still," and this is absolutely inexplicable. On the other hand, the Relative Truth (of the Unreal) manifests "stillness but is always

illuminating," which means that it is immanent in everything. (Hsu Heng Chi/P.H. Wei).

Pure Land thinkers such as the Patriarch Tao Ch'o accepted "the legitimacy of Conventional Truth as an expression of Ultimate Truth and as a vehicle to reach Ultimate Truth. Even though all form is nonform, it is acceptable and necessary to use form within the limits of causality, because its use is an expedient means of saving others out of one's compassion for them and because, even for the unenlightened, the use of form can lead to the revelation of form as nonform" (David Chappell). Thus to reach Buddhahood, which is formless, the cultivator can practice the Pure Land method based on form.

Unconditioned (Transcendental). Anything "without outflows," i.e., free of the three marks of greed, anger and delusion. See also "Conditioned."

Vaidehi. The Queen of King Bimbisara of Magadha, India. It was in response to her entreaties that Buddha Shakyamuni preached the *Meditation Sutra*, which teaches a series of sixteen visualizations (of Amitabha Buddha, the Pure Land ...) leading to rebirth in the Land of Ultimate Bliss.

Vairocana. The main Buddha in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. Represents the Dharma Body of Buddha Shakyamuni and all Buddhas. His Pure Land is the Flower Store World, i.e., the entire cosmos.

Vimalakirti Sutra. Also called *Vimalakirti Nirdesa Sutra*. A key Mahayana sutra particularly popular with Zen and to a lesser extent Pure Land followers. The protagonist is a layman named Vimalakirti who is the equal of many Bodhisattvas in wisdom, eloquence, etc. He explained the teaching of Emptiness in terms of non-duality. "The true nature of things is beyond the limiting concepts imposed by words." Thus, when asked by Manjusri to define the non-dual Truth, Vimalakirti simply remained silent.

Virtue. See "Merit and Virtue."

Visualization. See *Meditation Sutra* for explanation.

> The visualizations [in the *Meditation Sutra*] are distinguished into sixteen kinds [shifting from earthly scenes to Pure Land scenes at the third Visualization]: (1) visualization of the sun, (2) visualization of water, (3) visualization of the ground [in the Pure Land], (4) visualization of the trees, (5) visualization of the lake[s], (6) unified visualization of the [50 billion] storied-pavilions, trees, lakes, and so forth, (7) visualization of the [lotus throne of Amitabha Buddha], (8) visualization of the images of the Buddha [Amitabha] and Bodhisattvas [Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta], (9) visualization of the [Reward body of Amitabha Buddha, i.e., the form in which He appears in the Pure Land], (10) visualization of Avalokitesvara, (11) visualization of Mahasthamaprapta, (12) visualization of one's own rebirth, (13) [see below], (14) visualization of the rebirth of the highest grades, (15) visualization of the rebirth of the middle grades and (16). visualization of the rebirth of the lowest grades. (K.K. Tanaka, *The Dawn of Chinese Pure Land Doctrine.*)
>
> The 13th Visualization has been summarized as follows:
>
> If one cannot visualize the [Reward body of Amitabha Buddha], focus on the small body, which is sixteen cubits high (the traditional height of Shakyamuni while he dwelt on earth), contemplate an intermingling of the [Reward] and small bodies. (Joji Okazaki, p. 52.)

Visualizations 14-16 refer to the nine lotus grades (of rebirth), divided into three sets of three grades each.

Way (Path). The path leading to Supreme Enlightenment, to Buddhahood.

Wisdom-life. The life of a Buddha or Bodhisattva, which is sustained by wisdom, just as the life of an ordinary being is sustained by food.

Yogacara School. Another name for the Mind-Only school, founded in the fourth century by the brothers Asanga and Vasubandhu.

Zen. A major school of Mahayana Buddhism, with several branches. One of its most popular techniques is meditation on koans, which leads to the generation of the Great Doubt. According to this method:

> The master gives the student a koan to think about, resolve, and then report back on to the master. Concentration intensifies as the student first tries to solve the koan intellectually. This initial effort proves impossible, however, for a koan cannot be solved rationally. Indeed, it is a kind of spoof on the human intellect. Concentration and irrationality – these two elements constitute the characteristic psychic situation that engulfs the student wrestling with a koan. As this persistent effort to concentrate intellectually becomes unbearable, anxiety sets in. The entirety of one's consciousness and psychic life is now filled with one thought. The exertion of the search is like wrestling with a deadly enemy or trying to make one's way through a ring of flames. Such assaults on the fortress of human reason inevitably give rise to a distrust of all rational perception. This gnawing doubt [Great Doubt], combined with a futile search for a way out, creates a state of extreme and intense yearning for deliverance. The state may persist for days, weeks or even years; eventually the tension has to break. (Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism*, Vol. I, p. 253.)

An interesting koan is the koan of Buddha Recitation. Unlike other koans, it works in two ways. First of all, if a cultivator succeeds in his meditation through this koan, he can achieve awakening as with other koans. However, if he does not succeed, and experience shows that many cultivators do not, then the meditation on the Buddha's name helps him to achieve rebirth in the Pure Land. This is so, provided he believes (as most practitioners in Asia do) in Amitabha and the expedient Pure Land. Thus, the Buddha Recitation koan provides a safety net, and demonstrates the underlying unity of Zen and Pure Land.

This is a summary of the tenth Stage of Bodhisattvas, called Cloud of Teaching ... Whatever acts the Bodhisattvas undertake, whether through giving, or kind speech, or beneficial action, or cooperation, it is all never apart from thoughts of Buddha [Buddha Remembrance], the Teaching [Dharma], the Community [Sangha].

"The Ten Stages" Chapter
Avatamsaka Sutra

गुल्मी, थानपति-३ निवासी वेदराज ज्ञ :: द्वारा
..वाल्मीकि विद्यापीठ पुस्तकालयलाई
उपहार स्वरूप........प्रदान। वज्राचार्य
२०३४।११।

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I vow that when my life approaches its end,
All obstructions will be swept away;
I will see Amitabha Buddha,
And be born in his Land of Ultimate Bliss.

When reborn in the Western Land,
I will perfect and completely fulfill
Without exception these Great Vows,
To delight and benefit all beings.

The Vows of Samantabhadra
Avatamsaka Sutra

Selective Index

Amitabha (iii); 35ff; 45; 73ff;
  -Buddha of compassion (ii)
  -as Dharmakara (i)
  -as Self-Nature (iv); 101
Amitabha Sutra (i); 45; 187;
  -self spoken (i); 123; 160
Anathapindika 153
Avaivartika 81; 114
Avatamsaka Sutra (i); 45; 162
Birth and Death 100
Bodhi Mind (ii); 154
Bodhisattvas
  -Bardo stage 100
Brahma Net Sutra (i); 160; 168

Buddha Remembrance/ Recitation 3ff; 13ff; 33; 42ff; 59; 88ff; 120
  -effectiveness 27ff; 42; 81; 98
  -practice 14; 26; 39ff; 86; 89ff; 98; 148; 149; 153; 157; 184
Conditioned merits 163; 169
Demons 170
Dharmakara (i); (ii)
Endurance (World) see Saha World
Expedient means 147; 173

Faith (iv); 39ff; 59; 115
"Falling back" 80ff; 114
Fields of merit 163
Four Pure Lands 43ff; 57; 174
Good roots 86ff; 98; 159
Horizontal escape/ transcendence 103; 118; 160
Hsuan-tsang 106
Human rebirth 141
Karmic affinities 149ff

Kumarajiva 106
Lesser Vehicle 78; 87
Life provisions 125; 161
Merit transference 159; 178
Mind 36ff; 178
Mind-seal (ii)
Non-retrogression 81; 114
One-Practice Samadhi 113
Other-power 29; 100ff; 158; 180
Ou-i (i); 17ff; 124

Pure Land
  -dominant school (iii); 147; 182
  -characteristics (iv); 102
  -definition (iii)
  -existence (ii); 8; 40
  -joyfully seeking 116ff;
  -as Mind (iv); 7; 24ff; 36; 39; 59
  -practice see Buddha remembrance/recitation
  -tradition (iii); 147
Real mark 36ff; 152
Saha World 116; 120
  -revulsion toward 116; 120; 132

Samantabhadra's Vows 127ff
Singleminded recitation 86; 98; 153; 157; 184
Skill-in-means 147; 173
Sudden Perfect Teaching 99; 185
Sukhavati (11)
Suzuki, D.T. 151
Theravada 78
Third lifetime 186
Unconditioned merits 163; 169

Vows 41ff; 59; 83ff; 101; 115ff
  -of Samantabhadra 127ff
Yung-ming 100
Zen 44; 92; 94; 192

Acc. ৩২৫/657

DEDICATION OF MERIT

May the merit and virtue
accrued from this work
adorn Amitabha Buddha's Pure Land,
repay the four great kindnesses above,
and relieve the suffering of
those on the three paths below.

May those who see or hear of these efforts
generate Bodhi-mind,
spend their lives devoted to the Buddha Dharma,
and finally be reborn together in
the Land of Ultimate Bliss.
Homage to Amita Buddha!

NAMO AMITABHA
南無阿彌陀佛

財團法人佛陀教育基金會　印贈
台北市杭州南路一段五十五號十一樓

Printed and donated for free distribution by
The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation
11F., 55 Hang Chow South Road Sec 1, Taipei, Taiwan, R.O.C.
Tel: 886-2-23951198 , Fax: 886-2-23913415
Email: overseas@budaedu.org
Website:http://www.budaedu.org
This book is strictly for free distribution, it is not for sale.
Printed in Taiwan
5,000 copies; August 2004
EN084-3929

As this is a Dhamma text,
we request that it be treated with respect.
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財團法人佛陀教育基金會 印贈
台北市杭州南路一段五十五號十一樓
Printed and donated for free distribution by
The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation
11F., 55 Hang Chow South Road Sec 1, Taipei, Taiwan, R.O.C.
Tel:886-2-23951198, Fax:886-2-23913415
Email:overseas@budaedu.org
Website: http://www.budaedu.org

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Printed in Taiwan
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